

## Research

# Place Matters: First Graders' Places in A Norwegian School

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## Abstract

The transition to school in Norway has been a topic of ongoing debate since the reform in 1997 that lowered the school entry age from seven to six. While the reform initially emphasized play and self-directed activities in first grade, the political climate shifted following concerns about poor performance in the PISA tests, resulting in increased academic pressure. An evaluation of the reform published in 2024 highlighted the lack of adequate play environments in Norwegian schools and recommended the establishment of play-friendly areas. This article explores first graders' experiences of places within the school setting. We ask which places children find meaningful and important, and explore how they perceive restrictions and opportunities in these places. Theoretically we draw on the concept of children's places. Our methodological approach was visual ethnography, and fifteen children photographed places they enjoyed being and playing. These photographs were complemented by walking interviews, inviting children to share their stories. This study enhances understanding of the complexity of first graders' transition into everyday school life and illuminates key aspects of their well-being. Despite encountering restrictions on their use of school places, children developed meaningful relationships with various areas, transforming them into children's places where play and self-directed activities could occur. Our hermeneutical analysis reveals that children's experiences frame place as an ongoing process and show that school places can support well-being.

## Keywords

Everyday life; Transition to school; Well-being; Photovoice; Children's places; Children's self-directed play and activities

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## Introduction

In this article, we explore first graders' experience of places for children and children's places in school (cf. Rasmussen, 2004). Children's places can be understood as an integral part of childhood because children use, experience, and create places in their everyday life (Clark, 2017; Gruenwald, 2023; Rasmussen, 2023; Vilholm, 2022). The context for our research is children's transition from kindergarten to school. The transition to formal schooling often introduces children to a different daily structure, characterized by changes in organizational routines and restricted access to play-friendly physical places, which contrast significantly with the more flexible and play-oriented environment of early childhood education (Becher, 2018; Dockett et al., 2019; Schanke, 2019; Schanke & Øksnes, 2022). Due to an educational reform that lowered the school entry age in Norway in 1997, children were supposed to experience school as a place for play and self-directed activities in line with the Nordic kindergarten pedagogy. Initially, schools seemed to change their physical environment to facilitate play (Tønnesen & Valvik, 2002), but research indicates that teaching became dominant (Bjørnstad et al., 2024; Schanke, 2019; Schanke & Øksnes, 2022). Hence, fundamental aspects of school life that are essential for children to experience school as a good place to be (Dockett et al., 2019; Gruenwald, 2003; Ryan et al., 2008) were marginalized.

Research indicates that schools contribute to the decline of independent play and self-directed activities which are crucial for children's mental well-being. Instead, schools are often experienced as places where children feel unhappy and anxious (Gray, 2011; Gray et al., 2023; Whitebread, 2017). In Norway, schools are mandated to promote children's personal development and well-being in accordance with policy documents (Ministry of Education and Research, 2020). This aligns with Ryan et al. (2008) and self-determination theory, which emphasizes that psychological needs such as autonomy, competence, and relatedness form the foundation of personal growth and well-being. These principles resonate with the Norwegian school mandate. At the same time, global economic objectives drive a standardized, test-oriented education, an education for "anywhere" aimed at international competitiveness. Consequently, schools have increasingly become sites focused on academic outcomes through adult-led teaching. This reflects a view of schools as coherent and homogenous communities (Gruenwald, 2003). Alternatively, schools may be understood as lacking a single identity, instead characterized by internal tensions and contradictions (Massey, 1991). This perspective suggests that experiences of place are shaped by more than educational policy, as schools are "deeply pedagogical centers of experience and meaning making" (Gruenwald, 2003, p. 636).

There is a lack of knowledge about children's everyday life experiences in school (Bjørnstad et al., 2024; Kosher & Gross-Manos, 2024; Luo & Yuan, 2024). A call for more research in Norway on children's experiences of the transition process to school (Lillejord et al., 2015) has motivated our study. Our research question is: *What places do children present as meaningful and important in school, and how do they experience restrictions and possibilities at these places?* To shed light on these questions, we build on a fieldwork conducted at a Norwegian primary school during spring 2023. Our study was part of an action research project (2020–2024) that aimed to improve the school start experience by enhancing the continuity of kindergarten pedagogy. Children in the current study photographed and told us about their experiences of places in school three years after the project started. In our hermeneutic analysis, we became aware that children experienced that

their use of places in school often conflicted with restrictions imposed by staff. At the same time children developed meaningful relations to many of these places and created *children's places*.

While many transition studies focus on instrumental outcomes such as effective teaching and school readiness (Lillejord et al., 2015), our research moves beyond this educational framework. Theoretically, we draw on perspectives from childhood studies and children's geographies, particularly the concepts of children's places (Rasmussen, 2004) and places as continually constructed (Massey, 1991). These ideas informed a nuanced analysis of children's everyday lives in school. The study documents children's experiences of places and offers insights into how they navigate and inhabit them. Our findings advance theoretical and empirical understandings of transition and children's places by showing how children challenge the notion of school as a static entity. Instead, places emerge as processes (Massey, 1991), reflected in children's experiences of shifting practices and changing relationships to specific places within their school.

## Previous Research

To position our study, several articles were reviewed, and relevant findings from national and international research are presented. Our interpretation is that research on children's everyday lives, particularly their experiences within school settings, is relatively scarce compared to the broader field of educational research that focuses on teaching and learning. Studies such as Koshier and Gross-Manos (2024) and Becher (2018) highlight this gap, especially regarding children's places in school. Moreover, children are rarely invited to share their own experiences of school life (Dockett & Perry, 2022;). Grounded in our understanding of transition as an ongoing process that continues into school (Dockett et al., 2019), our review emphasizes children's lived experiences of places in school. We have tried to identify articles that could contribute to a more comprehensive understanding of this field. Certain topics are highlighted as relevant to our dialogue with our empirical material, such as play, friendship, belonging, and well-being.

Although several studies highlight the potential benefits of children's participation in the design of physical spaces and furnishings (Burke, 2008; Clark, 2017; Crook, 2020;), children are seldom given the opportunity to create or co-create these places themselves (Becher, 2018; Holloway & Valentine, 2000). Historical research suggests that children have always sought to create their own places without waiting for adult permission and indicates a tension between adult-led activities and children's desire to find their own ways of playing and doing things (Chudacoff, 2011). Similar findings are presented in both international (Corsaro, 2017) and national research (Øksnes & Sundsdal, 2020; Sirevåg, 2023). In relation to self-determination theory, Ryan et al. (2008) discuss the concept of living well. Living well refers to a way of living and human happiness centered on what is intrinsically worthwhile to human beings and relates to a sense of meaning, subjective vitality and quality friendship. Human happiness as part of living well is best supported by structures that allow children to experience psychological freedom and foster strong connections with other children (Ryan et al., 2008).

Referring to self-determination theory, Gray et al. (2023) argue that play and self-directed activities undertaken for their own sake often generate experiences of freedom and meaning that contribute to children's happiness. Yet, as a society, we seem to have brought children "into settings that make children unhappy and anxious and have deprived them of the activities that make them happy" (Gray, 2011, p. 458). Research across different countries confirms that places play a crucial role in

shaping children's experiences of freedom and meaning (Einarsdottir & Olafsdottir, 2021; Lehto & Eskelinen, 2020; Rasmussen, 2023; Schanke & Øksnes, 2022). Another study highlights that children are drawn to 'in-between spaces' – areas not explicitly designed for children's activities. These places are often overlooked by staff, making them more relaxed environments or perceived as secret, playful hideaways. Hence, children prefer these areas for play (Aminpour et al., 2020).

Studies examining children's lived experiences within diverse school environments indicate that these experiences frequently diverge from the conceptual frameworks envisioned by the adults who designed them (Cartmel et al., 2023; Jørgensen & Allan, 2022). Other research shows how children regard hallways, libraries, atriums, and toilets as important places for interacting with friends and show signs of joy being in such places where adults do not want them to stay unnecessarily (Kellock & Sexton, 2017). When it comes to classroom design, primary school classrooms are mostly provided with desks, chairs and a blackboard, necessary furniture to teach the curriculum to many children, but they are far less equipped with furniture and materials for play and rest (Becher, 2018; Kirkeby et al., 2005).

Recently, there has been a growing interest in children's sense of belonging to their school (Ackesjö, 2023; Dockett & Perry, 2022) and to their classroom (Erwin et al., 2022; Green & Turner, 2017). Some of this research emphasizes the emotions of familiarity and feeling at home in school (Kyrönlampi et al., 2021; Leggett & Ford, 2016). A study by Wastell and Degotardi (2017) shows that children love to do things indoors. The activities described are often related to resources such as drawing or painting materials, puzzles, and board games. Through these activities, children build connections with each other and create meaningful relations to their places in school. First graders in Norway report that, compared to kindergarten, they spend more time indoors in school, but the indoors environment lack materials with which to build and play (Schanke & Øksnes, 2022). In another study, children from eight to ten years in England describe how they build and maintain friendships in their classrooms, emphasizing how this is an important aspect of their school life and well-being (Kellock & Sexton, 2017). Moore and Lynch (2017) find that children particularly highlight play as an activity that makes them happy and hence seek places where they can play.

A great deal of research has been conducted on outdoor activities in kindergarten (Waller et al., 2017). Similar research on schools is limited. An interesting finding from kindergarten studies is the attention and appreciation that children have for nature (Rasmussen, 2023). A study by Aminpour et al. (2020) shows how children often identified outdoor areas in their schoolyards, big trees, and willows as popular places because they offer opportunities to climb or form imaginary "houses." Massive tree trunks and stumps were favored natural materials, often used to represent helicopters or cars, or as hiding places. Workable elements like mud, sticks, leaves, and woodchips were also highly valued for both constructive and imaginative play.

The research on children's everyday life experiences of the transition process in school and of children's places in school appears limited. Among the studies reviewed, school is often described as a place where children play and create meaningful friendships, experience subjective vitality and belonging, and a sense of meaning. Taken together, this research suggests that children's experiences of school are shaped by more than educational policy, and supports the view that children are place makers (Gruenwald, 2003).

## Theoretical Framework

From the perspective of democratic education, Gruenwald (2003) argues that schools must provide opportunities for children to participate meaningfully in the process of place making. That is the process of shaping what our places may become. He suggests that our relationship with places has been obscured by the educational system, as schooling often distracts attention from the contexts of our lives, including school itself as a primary context of experience. The theoretical framework informing our analysis engages with children's active role in shaping places, and it discusses the relation between *places for children* and *children's places* (Rasmussen, 2004, 2023). Rasmussen (2004, p. 165) describes these places as follows:

A key difference between “children’s places” and “places for children” is that while adults can point out and identify “places for children”, to begin with only children can show and tell about “children’s places”. A place, including “places for children”, becomes a “children’s place” after a child connects with it physically (...).

Whilst “places for children” display adults’ ideas about children’s needs (classrooms, playgrounds, toys, fences, etc.), “children’s places” make clear that children develop meaningful relationships to places. In contrast to the conception of place as referring to the location, children’s places reflect children’s experiences and stories of the places where they like to be and the places that are important to them (Rasmussen, 2004, 2023). This assessment is based on what children show and tell. Children establish meaningful relations to places based on experiences of feelings such as fun, happiness, and well-being. The concept of children’s places is closely related to the idea of children as co-creators of their lives. It is important to note that children’s places may not last; although the relationship can sometimes last for years, it sometimes ends after only a short period. Local weather conditions and the time of year can play a significant role in the relation to places and its duration. The presence of snow and ice to play with in the winter, and flowers and leaves in the summer, may serve as resources, but seasonal changes may also restrict the use of places (Rasmussen, 2004; Vilholm, 2022). However, institutional emphasis is typically directed toward pedagogical restrictions.

Places in schools are often imposed with pedagogical limitations that serve to regulate and control children’s bodies and actions. It is for example assumed that in school, children learn that play occurs in designated places, which are interpreted as places for children, and that certain styles of play that may be appropriate for the playground are not permissible within the structured educational “play” of the classroom (Thomson, 2005). This form of control and organization is a dominant feature of practice in schools, but studies also show that children resist adults’ restrictions (Tisdall & Punch, 2012). Chudacoff (2011, p. 108) argues that:

Children find ways to appropriate their own play sites, incorporate and transform a multitude of objects into playthings, and conspire ways to elude adult management (...). That ability to find fun in a “town” of boys or girls, exclusive adults, is and has been what is wondrous about children’s play.

These play sites can be interpreted as children’s places. Theoretically, children’s relation to these places can be understood considering the French philosopher Michel Foucault’s (1999) concept of power relations and his assertion that where there is power there is also resistance. This means that schools and classrooms cannot be viewed as containers filled with power that produce docile

children. Massey (1991, p 28) suggests that “place is constructed out of a particular constellation of social relations, meeting and weaving together at a particular locus”. In line with Massey and Foucault, places are continually negotiated and remade. Life in school offers opportunities for children to experience concrete freedom, challenge norms and rules, and resist disciplinary power, *within* places for children. Some places may be more regulated by power and discipline than others. But even so, there will always be places that allow for transgressive acts where power does not reach children. In these places, children may relate to themselves and to others in ways that are freer than in the more official parts of school.

## Methodological Reflections

To achieve a rich and nuanced understanding of how children experience places in school, this study draws on visual ethnography and the photovoice method (Pink, 2021; Rasmussen, 2017). Clark (2017) argues that cameras can serve as tools to capture the “silent voice” of children, providing researchers access to aspects of their experiences that might otherwise remain hidden. We invited children to express their experiences of school places through photovoice (Cooper, 2017; Rasmussen, 2004, 2023). Children’s photographs were complemented by walking interviews, offering deeper insight into their perspectives on the places they captured with the cameras (cf. Clark, 2017; Rasmussen, 2023).

Fifteen six-year-old children participated in the study. In line with hermeneutical practice and an emphasis on particularity, each child’s contribution was regarded as distinctive and significant (Moules et al., 2015). The guideline for taking the photos was to focus on the places where they liked to be and play at school. The children could decide whether to participate alone or in small groups of two or three children. Only a few participated alone. Our role as researchers was to conduct walking interviews (Clark, 2017). We walked with the children for approximately 20–30 minutes, and listened to their stories about different places, and what they liked to do there. These interviews gave an opportunity to explore the context and significance of the photos, providing a deeper understanding of children’s relations to the different places that they depicted. As our fieldwork took place over several weeks during spring 2023, we had the opportunity to observe different weather conditions, from snow and ice to sun and mud, which affected the children’s relation to and experience of places in school.

Together the children took more than 200 photos. Some children wanted to take pictures of many places and things, whilst others were more specific and photographed just a few places. Some of the pictures had more detailed stories and reasons for being taken, whilst others seemed less focused and were taken in a more playful way. Our analytical approach was guided by philosophical hermeneutics, where analysis is understood as interpretation (cf. Gadamer, 1989; Moules et al., 2015). We acknowledge that our own pre-understandings may shape interpretation. Theoretically, we assumed that children both affect and are affected by school as a place. Based on previous research, we anticipated that school primarily restricts children as place makers (Schanke & Øksnes, 2022). At the same time, we sought openness to new understandings through dialogue with research texts, close study of children’s photographs, and attentive listening to their stories. Fieldwork and action research over three years deepened insights into the relationship between places for children and children’s places beyond what short-term studies typically allow (Tiller,

2015). The analytic meaning making process was collaborative and enhanced in-depth, rigorous and reflexive conversation with the data. Rather than imposing a single theme, we aimed to open associations that illuminate children's relations to places, highlighting both exemplars and counter-exemplars. We deliberately attempted to pay attention to particulars of experience (Moules et al., 2015) and recognized extraordinary occurrences. Being aware of the risk of thematic reductionism we sought points of affinity and relationship.

Despite being a local project involving few participants, the challenges identified by staff and children reflect common issues in Norwegian schools (Bjørnstad et al., 2024). A limitation of hermeneutic research is that its findings lack power in the traditional quantitative sense. However, validity can be understood in terms of the extent to which the research informed and transformed practice at the participating school, where staff became more place-conscious and began questioning their transition practices (Øksnes et al., 2024). Such research may also offer analytical generalization, enabling reflections that guide others in similar contexts toward "doing things differently" (cf. Moules et al., 2015, p. 173).

The legal basis for the project was approved by the Norwegian Agency for Shared Services in Education and Research (SIKT). Ethical challenges that arise in research with children have been considered and handled in the ways that we found most respectful. The children were given information about the project and their participation, specifically tailored for their age group. Children's participation was based on their parents' consent. The children's own interest and active consent to take photos and talk with us was crucial from our research ethical point of view (Clark, 2017). We asked the children for permission to use their pictures in publications. Even though we have been mindful of the inherent power asymmetry towards children in our role as adult researchers (Clark, 2017), our experience shows that children often challenge this imbalance through their playful presence. However, revealing children's places demands ethical consideration. When we display children's places in research, we may reveal their private or secret places and expose them to more restrictions than they had before the research started. In this action research project, we considered it essential to provide examples that staff could reflect upon and learn from (Tiller, 2015). We trusted that this approach would foster a place-conscious education, an education that asserts the significance of school as a lived place and resists abstracting its purpose from the physical areas where children experience it (Gruenewald, 2003). Such an education acknowledges children's interest in preserving their freedom through the pursuit of intrinsically meaningful activities (Gray, 2011; Ryan et al., 2008).

## Findings and Discussion

Engaging hermeneutically (cf. Moules et al., 2015) with all the photos, made us aware of the complexity of children's relation to places in school. The children took pictures of many places indoors and outdoors. For ethical reasons, we asked the children to take photographs when no other children were present indoors or outdoors. This pragmatic choice affects the structure of our descriptive presentation of children's photovoice. It also reflects our pre-definition of indoors and outdoors as two different places in school regarding children's experiences of freedom and living well. When the walking interviews started the children responded enthusiastically, walking indoors and running outdoors toward the places they wanted to photograph. This may be interpreted as

children's perception of different possibilities and restrictions indoors and outdoors. Children showed and told us in ways that we interpret as an expression of their physical connection, emotional and meaningful relations to certain places (cf. Rasmussen, 2004). Based on children's photovoice, our interpretation is that even though they experience immediate restrictions, first graders often find their own ways to challenge adults' regulations of places (cf. Chudacoff, 2011). Hence, first graders create children's places (Rasmussen, 2004) by resisting disciplinary power within places for children where they can experience moments of concrete freedom (Foucault, 1999). We argue that through *playful resistance* children experience *freedom within restrictions*. This freedom is related to the pursuit of *privacy*, but also *belonging* to a community where strong friendships may develop. Before we discuss the complexity of children's experiences of possibilities and restrictions through examples from the material, we present children's places in school through their photovoice.

### Children's outdoor places

Children's photographs of many different places could be interpreted as an expression of children's diverse interests and needs, showing how they prefer and make use of different places for children and places not actually meant for children. We noticed that many of the pictures included natural materials. In line with other studies, the children photographed trees, large stones, bushes, and seasonal elements such as ice, snow piles, and snow slides (Aminpour et al., 2020; Rasmussen, 2023). The accompanying stories described how first graders liked to play in these places. We interpreted children's enthusiasm as a sign of the importance these places held for them, assuming they were children's places at that moment. During the winter, climbing snow piles was popular, as well as crawling into the snow or sliding on the ice (Photos 1 & 2).



Photo 1: The snowpile



Photo 2: The icy schoolyard



Photo 3: The slide

In addition, several children took pictures of specific play equipment in the school's playground, such as the slide (Photo 3). The slide is a good example of how children challenge the rules in places for children by using the equipment in their own way – climbing upwards or sending toy cars down the slide to see which one jumps the furthest, rather than merely sliding down as it was designed for. We interpret this as a way of turning the slide into a children's place through playful resistance towards staff's rules (Bateson & Martin, 2013).

The weather and the seasons in Norway clearly influence which places children find important and meaningful. The first graders in our study seemed to find both frustration and pleasure in these changing conditions (cf. Rasmussen, 2004; Vilholm, 2022). One example is the playground spinner (Photo 4). One girl exclaimed, "I love the spinner, but in wintertime it is stuck!" She elaborated on how much fun it is during springtime when they can spin it. On rainy days, it was possible to spin

around and play with the muddy water (Photo 5). The spinner exemplifies how a place intended for children is shaped by weather conditions, creating both constraints and possibilities for use.



Photo 4: The playground spinner in winter



Photo 5: The playground spinner in spring

The children tell us that outdoor natural elements, such as berries, leaves, mud, and sticks, are meaningful resources in the places where they like to be, and they blend into their play. The children in our study also photographed places that were important to them regardless of the season. One of these places was “The Silly Tree” (Photo 6), where first graders engaged themselves with pretend play and climbing, or used the branches as a theater stage where they could perform silly plays. Amid laughter and giggling, three girls used their bodies to show how these different plays could be performed in the tree. The tree offered numerous ways of involving meaningfully with this place.



Photo 6: The Silly Tree



Photo 7: The bushes

Another example of a place that children found important was the bushes (Photo 7) in the schoolyard, which offered in-between spaces (cf. Aminpour et al., 2020). Here the children could hide and carry out different forms of pretend play. When showing us the bushes, one girl exclaimed “I like to play here!” The researcher commented on the spikes that she observed on the bushes and wondered how they could play there. The girl answered: “That is the whole point. There are no spikes where we are.” This may be an example of how a place gives meaning to children that are not obvious to adults. The children found a way to play in between the spikes. She further explained: “This is a research laboratory. We find things in the tunnels and research them afterwards.” The Silly Tree and the bushes are examples of places where children come together, but they could also be interpreted as private places in an overcrowded schoolyard (cf. Aminpour et al., 2020).

## Children's indoor places

Rasmussen (2004) emphasizes outdoor places as children's places. Our study shows that children's interests are focused on both outdoor and indoor places. Children's photovoice suggests that the outdoor playground is less regulated by staff than indoor areas. The children we talked to at the start of the action research project reported that they missed kindergarten because there were more opportunities to play indoors than in school (Schanke & Øksnes, 2022). In school they lacked materials to play with indoors – a common challenge reported in many Norwegian schools (Bjørnstad et al., 2024). The photos from the current study reflect a richness of material to play with, indicating that the staff had developed a more space-conscious education (Grunewald, 2003) and play-friendly environment.

We found that children selectively photographed places indoors where they played and carried out self-directed activities. Children highlighted them as places where they liked to be (cf. Moore & Lynch, 2017; Schanke & Øksnes, 2022). Furthermore, they photographed various places that seemed to be bound to certain materials: the gym mats (Photo 8), building blocks and construction toys. Children told us that this material was used in different ways in various forms of play, such as representing food or simply being used as building material (Photo 9). Costumes for pretend play appeared in many photos. Children enjoyed participating in pretend play in one of the smaller classrooms, with no desks or chairs. The window shelf in this room was a favored place used as a "home" due to the curtain that made it possible to create a private spot behind it (Photo 10). Another popular place that appeared in several of the photos was "The Silly Sofa" where the children liked to relax and play (Photo 11). Like in the schoolyard, these are examples of places that children inhabit because they enjoy being there. This includes places that are not even designed for children and where children's playful resistance sometimes may transform them into children's places.



Photo 8: The gym mats



Photo 9: The construction toys

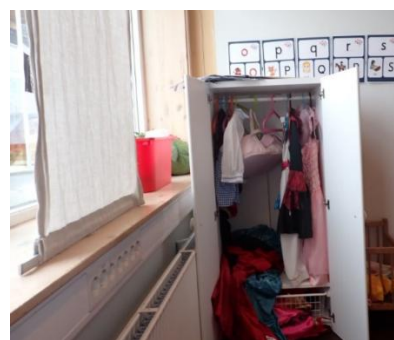


Photo 10: The big window shelf

Children's pictures show their interest in building houses (Photo 13), and they gave detailed descriptions of the rooms that the houses contained, such as toilet, bedroom, living room, and even a reading room. These houses seemed to become children's places where they could play more privately, without adult supervision or interference from other children (e.g., Aminpour et al., 2020). The need for more private places also seemed to be important indoors.



Photo 11: The silly sofa



Photo 12: The houses built from gym mats

We noticed many pictures of children's own creations: drawings, paintings, and Lego figures (Photos 13, 14, & 15). We learned from children's stories that they appreciated the materials they could use to make crafts. This may be interpreted in line with former studies that show how children's own creations are seen as an expression of belonging to a place by making it more personal (Leggett & Ford, 2016; Wastell & Degotardi, 2017). In the walking interviews, the children led us through their classrooms, photographing their own drawings and those of their classmates, and told us stories about the content of the pictures. They photographed overviews on the wall showing students in their class. It seemed important for them to tell us who belonged to this place together with them.



Photo 13: Drawings in the hallway



Photo 14: Paintings hanging in the classroom

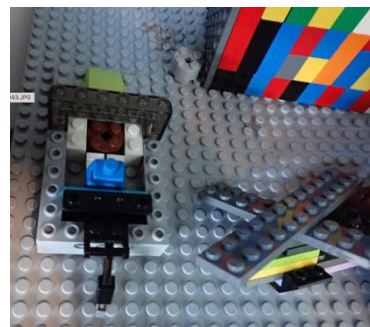


Photo 15: Lego creations

We interpret children's emphasis on their own creations as an expression of their appreciation of the time and opportunity to engage in self-directed activities with crafting materials. Beads were another favorite craft material (Photos 16 & 17). The creations that the children made seem to be important to them (Kyrönlampi et al., 2021; Wastell & Degotardi, 2017). Even if staff had placed manuals or instructions for beading or coloring on the tables, pictures showed that the children often carried out their own playful ideas, resulting in various expressions of their peer culture in drawings, beadings, and Lego creations (Corsaro, 2017; Vilholm, 2022).



Photo 16: Unfinished beadings on hold in a classroom    Photo 17: Finished beadings on display

Only a few children photographed places that were usually associated with teaching, such as the smart board, their desk, or the “listening corner,” whilst pictures of places to play and their own creations were highly represented. When asked to photograph places they liked to be, not surprisingly, children seemed to prefer play-friendly places. An important finding is that some places first graders found meaningful were often associated with restrictions. Yet, despite these limitations, children frequently discovered playful possibilities within them. It may also be that the limitations themselves made the play more exciting. This aligns with the view that play often involves breaking rules and that the fun lies in doing so (Bateson & Martin, 2013).

### Children’s experiences of restrictions and possibilities

Through their photovoice, children provided us with a visual and descriptive presentation of children’s places. In their stories they went beyond the photos themselves, adding nuance to how places are experienced by first graders and to the idea that places are interpreted as having one coherent single identity (cf. Massey, 1991). We noticed that children and staff often had different perspectives on certain places in school, revealing tensions and contradictions between restrictions and possibilities in various places. Altogether, our analysis shows that places for children and children’s places are related but not the same (e.g., Rasmussen, 2004). This study argues that children’s places in school can be understood as places in process (Massey, 1991), shaped by a dynamic interplay of weather conditions, children’s interests and needs, and staff’s pedagogical approaches. Within the broader context of the transition from kindergarten to school, these experiences offer valuable insights into how children perceive and navigate their new school environment.

Children’s photovoice highlighted how Norway’s varied weather both restricts and enables independent play and activities. For example, the spinner was considered meaningless when frozen, but fun when it could spin. Thus, the spinner may be interpreted as children’s place only for part of the season. Staff restrictions added complexity to experiences of certain places outdoors. Sliding down snow piles was highly popular, yet often prohibited when icy due to safety concerns. Children explained that soft snow made the activity acceptable, while ice rendered it dangerous, though some of the children admitted playing there even against staff instructions. Children’s photovoice provides a complex picture of how they relate to school as a place that is loaded with norms and staff regulations (cf. Kirkeby et.al. 2005). The big window shelf in the classroom is another example of a place where children wanted to play. The staff initially considered it unsuitable for play, but children’s places often seemed to emerge through *playful resistance* to staff restrictions (cf. Bateson & Martin, 2013; Foucault, 1999). Hence, children appropriated the window shelf and made it their place.

Children often find ways to appropriate their own play sites. Our interpretation is that this happens not only at a distance from staff but also within staff's restrictions. Children told us about several restrictions in certain places, especially indoors, yet through various examples they showed how they found playful ways to use these spaces (Rasmussen, 2004). The sofa, which was intended to be a good reading spot, invited play and silliness for children. Thus, children called it "The Silly Sofa". This indicates that children's use of places, such as the sofa, can differ significantly from the intentional design. Another central example in our material is how the children built their own houses. These houses potentially provided more *privacy* for the children, and they seemed to have a lot of fun while building houses. Since the housebuilding was restricted to only one room, the activity challenged the staff's need for order, control, and tidiness in a room that was also needed for educational purposes (cf. Vilholm, 2022). Although the first graders put a lot of effort into building these houses, it was difficult for staff to change the rules and allow the houses to stand for several days. Nevertheless, the children built new houses every day, adapting to the rule of tidying them away at the end of the day. This can also be seen as playfully challenging the rules. One way to understand children's resistance is as an expression of place making, and that they do not simply accept the places offered to them. In their pursuit of play and fun, children often sought to come together with peers and friends, but gaining some degree of privacy seemed important too. We interpret the housebuilding and activities in the window shelves as examples of children's collaborative place making in the quest for privacy from staff regulations and surveillance.

There are counterexamples showing that children experience challenges in establishing meaningful relations to places in school. One such example concerns children's beadwork and restrictions of place. This beading on pegboards was always done inside one classroom. Many of the children expressed that they loved beading figures. Beading, however, could be a risky activity due to the rule stating that children were not allowed to leave their beadwork "on hold" until the next day if it was not finished and ready to be ironed. The children described this as stressful because they had to hurry to finish their beadwork. The rule was explained with arguments about how messy it got with too many beadings that were placed "on hold" in the classrooms waiting to be ironed. This example illustrates how the classroom was considered a place for teaching and learning, with consequences for its use (Kirkeby, Gitz-Johansen & Kampmann, 2005). The children's feelings about the rules for beadwork were presented at a seminar and made practitioners realize that they were part of an unreflected practice (Øksnes et al., 2024). Gaining insight into children's experiences led to an awareness that place as pedagogical centers (Grunewald, 2003) matter for children's well-being, and the staff changed their practices. Children's photographs in this study show many beadings in progress. We interpret this as an expression of how the school became more play-friendly and child-ready. The staff became aware that beading was a favored activity among the children, and that the creations they made were meaningful to them. We understand this as linked to the experience of belonging, as beadwork was acknowledged as an activity that required a place within the classroom. Consistent with previous research (Leggett & Ford, 2016; Kyrönlampi et al., 2021), being allowed to inhabit school places with their own creations appears to contribute to the personalization of those places.

We question whether the classroom imposed stronger restrictions on what was not allowed than other places of the school, because it was the main area for teaching. In the beading situations, children did not resist the rules but complied with them. The power relation between staff and children appeared more asymmetrical (e.g., Foucault, 1999), and the social relations within this

place seemed to shape and constrain the possibilities for action (Massey, 1991). In this situation, unlike children's playful use of the sofa, staff rules proved less negotiable. Allowing children to store beadwork in the classroom illustrates Massey's (1991) notion of place as process, marking a moment when spatial relations and power dynamics were renegotiated. It also reflects the diversity among children and their shifting interests across situations, showing that children do not relate to school places in a single, fixed way.

Children's photos and stories reveal that places in school are processes and shaped by both restrictions and possibilities (cf. Foucault, 1999; Massey, 1991; Gruenewald, 2003). Through playful resistance and the pursuit of privacy and belonging, children experience freedom within restrictions in school. We suggest that these dynamics unfold in a complex dialogue between places for children and children's places. In our understanding, playgrounds for example, may be places for children, but they are not always perceived as meaningful. Playgrounds may become children's places where children can live well. In the process of this place making, children gain inspiration from places for children regulated by staff. With their playful resistance, children transform places seeking a sense of meaning, subjective vitality and quality friendship (Ryan et al., 2008). In this process children transformed indoor places into playgrounds challenging the idea that the outdoor schoolyard is the place for playing and doing things that make children feel happy.

## Concluding Remarks

The research question of this study was: *What places do children present as meaningful and important in school, and how do they experience restrictions and possibilities at these places?* Our findings provide a nuanced picture of children's experiences of places in a Norwegian school. We suggest that children's photovoice underpins the complexity of their everyday life in school and thus their transition process. For the children in our study, school is more than a place for teaching and learning; school is a place in which children live their lives and play with their friends. The children's photovoice shows the places where they like to be, but also indicates their changing relation to places due to an understanding of place as formed through a specific set of social relations that intersect and interact at a given location (Massey, 1991, p 28). The first graders in our study experienced restrictions in places for children at school, but they often seem to make their own places for self-directed activities and play – *children's places*. Through playful resistance they seemed to find possibilities to make school more private, personal and a place to belong. This may be essential to children if we want them to experience freedom and well-being in school (Gray, 2011, Ryan et al., 2008). This is not an argument to leave children on their own in school and trust that all children will find the possibilities to establish meaningful children's places. Rather, we suggest that it is beneficial for children when staff develop place-consciousness (Gruenewald, 2003) and recognize that children often attribute meaning to places that are not explicitly designated for play or other child-directed activities. However, it is the dialogue between *places for children* and *children's places* that seem to produce a sense of meaning, subjective vitality and quality friendship (Ryan et al., 2008). Children are not passive users of places; they actively negotiate and redefine them.

The knowledge generated from the overall action research project tells us that, in their transition to school, first graders seem to feel more at home when practice and the physical environment

become more play-friendly due to both physical environment and pedagogical approach. Both indoor and outdoor places appeared to be important in children's experiences of a meaningful everyday school life. Children do not seem to differentiate between indoors and outdoors in their pursuit of meaning, play and happiness. This knowledge is important to those who are concerned that school should be not only a place for learning and teaching but also a place where children experience well-being and belonging on their own terms. In line with the perspective of democratic education (Gruenwald, 2003), an implication of this research could be to include children by acknowledging their voices and providing opportunities for children to participate meaningfully in the process of place making.

Another implication of our study is that listening to children, including observing and getting to know children's interests and needs may prevent us from becoming blind to the current conditions – how we restrict places for children (Gruenwald, 2003). The development of school as a good place to be, where children can experience a sense of meaning, subjective vitality and quality friendship (Ryan et al., 2008), demands professional reflection, respectful listening, and playful approaches. We suggest that there is a need for more research that explores children's everyday lives in school as a physical place, and research that listens to children's voices. This could develop knowledge about the complexity of children's institutional lives and contribute to a better understanding of children's experiences of, and dynamic relations to, places in school.

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## Data Availability Statement

The data that supports the findings of this study are not publicly available due to ethical restrictions and guidelines. The research participants have been promised to be kept anonymous. In this study, children have participated, which requires extra caution in maintaining research ethical guidelines.

## Competing Interests

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial or personal interests that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

## Author Contributions

Tuva Schanke: Conceptualization, Data Curation, Formal Analysis, Investigation, Methodology, Writing – Original Draft, Writing – Review & Editing

Maria Øksnes: Conceptualization, Data Curation, Formal Analysis, Investigation, Methodology, Writing – Original Draft, Writing – Review & Editing

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