



Children's Agency: Opportunities and Constraints

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Abstract

Children's agency accords with the principles emphasised by the Convention on the Rights of the Child (United Nations in Convention on the rights of the child. UN Office of High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR), Geneva. Retrieved from, <https://www.ohchr.org/EN/ProfessionalInterest/Pages/CRC.aspx>, 1989). This study focuses on children's opportunities for agency in first grade of a Finnish primary school. The research explored how children's agency was evident in photographs taken by 16 children on their school experiences and discussions with the researcher about the photographs. A phenomenological approach was used in the analyses to identify four themes in the data: the social order of school; teacher's pedagogical tools; break times; and learning new skills. In the school context, the children's agency seemed to require continuous balancing between the children's freedom and adults' power and authority. Pedagogically, the results imply that the adults who work with children can listen closely to children's voices in order to strengthen opportunities in classrooms and to support children's sense of personal agency. The study challenges teachers to consider how classroom practices may divide or categorise some children and how these practice may reduce children's participation, contribution and agency.

Keywords Children's rights · Agency · Children's voice · Phenomenology · Primary school

Résumé

La capacité d'agir des enfants est conforme aux principes mis de l'avant dans la Convention relative aux droits de l'enfant (Nations Unies, 1989). Cette étude se concentre sur les occasions d'agir de la part d'enfants de première année d'une école

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primaire finlandaise. La recherche a exploré comment la capacité d’agir des enfants était évidente dans des photos prises par 16 enfants concernant leurs expériences scolaires et dans les discussions avec le chercheur sur les photos. Une approche phénoménologique a été utilisée dans les analyses pour identifier quatre thèmes dans les données: l’ordre social de l’école, les outils pédagogiques de l’enseignant, les temps de pause et l’apprentissage de nouvelles compétences. Dans le contexte scolaire, l’action des enfants semble exiger un équilibre continu entre la liberté des enfants et le pouvoir et l’autorité des adultes. Sur le plan pédagogique, les résultats suggèrent que les adultes travaillant avec les enfants peuvent écouter attentivement leur voix pour renforcer en classe les occasions de soutenir le sens de l’action personnelle chez les enfants. L’étude met les enseignants au défi d’examiner comment les pratiques en classe peuvent diviser ou catégoriser certains enfants, et comment de telles pratiques peuvent diminuer la participation, la contribution et la capacité d’agir des enfants.

Resumen

La agencia infantil concuerda con los principios resaltados en la Convención sobre los Derechos del Niño (Naciones Unidas, 1989). El presente estudio se centra en las oportunidades de participación activa de niños en el primer año de educación en una escuela de primaria en Finlandia. Esta investigación exploró la forma en que la participación de los niños se evidencia en fotografías tomadas por 16 niños en sus experiencias escolares y en discusiones con el investigador sobre dichas fotografías. Se utilizó un método fenomenológico en el análisis para identificar cuatro temas a partir de los datos: orden social en la escuela; herramientas pedagógicas del educador; tiempos de descanso; y aprendizaje de nuevas habilidades. En el contexto escolar, la participación activa de los niños pareciera requerir un continuo equilibrio entre la libertad de niños y el poder y la autoridad de los adultos. Desde un punto de vista pedagógico, los resultados sugieren que los educadores infantiles pueden escuchar de cerca las voces de los niños en el salón de clase y así fortalecer su sentido de agencia personal. Este estudio reta a los educadores a considerar cómo las prácticas en el salón de clase podrían llegar a dividir o categorizar a ciertos niños, y cómo dichas prácticas podrían reducir la participación, contribución y agencia de los niños.

Introduction

Thirty years after the *Convention on the Rights of the Child* was ratified by the United Nations General Assembly (1989), children’s opportunities to be active agents in their own lives are not necessarily evident across all countries (Hart and Brando 2018). Early childhood education settings can provide ideal arenas for the realisation of children’s agentic rights. However, pedagogical and institutional practices can either enable or constrain children’s agency (Smith 2016), because adults do not necessarily notice situations which may hinder children’s agency or provide opportunities for children to participate in decision-making (Gurdal and Sorbring 2018; Lipponen et al. 2018; Ruscoe et al. 2018). As a part of a larger international project, this study explores children’s experiences of agency in the first grade of a

Finnish primary school. The question addressed in this research is: How do children's experiences of their agency appear in children's photographs and discussions in the first grade of a Finnish primary school?

Children's agency is closely connected to the principles emphasised by the *Convention of the Rights of the Child* (United Nations 1989). Even though the term 'children's agency' is not explicitly mentioned in this convention, it is embedded within the ethos of children's agentic rights (Harcourt and Hägglund 2013). For example, social research has connected children's agency to Article 12 of the convention that highlights the importance of children's opportunities to influence decision-making in which their voices should be heard in matters that affect them (e.g. Harcourt and Hägglund 2013; Hart and Brando 2018; Mayne and Rennie 2018).

Rationale for a Research Focus on Children's Agency

A growing body of research addresses children's agency; however, some challenges must still be addressed. First, agency is an abstract, vaguely defined and ill-theorised concept that tends to be taken for granted and is unproblematised in academic discourse (Bordonaro 2012; Mentha et al. 2015). Some scholars have criticised those who equate the notion of children's agency with freedom and absence of constraints. As Punch (2016) explained, 'There is often an assumption that adult-imposed structure or adult power over children is negative and something that children should assert their agency to resist or counteract' (p. 185). It also seems challenging to understand how to balance children's agentic rights with their natural state as children, with respect to vulnerability, dependency, passivity and need for protection (Hudson 2012; Punch 2016). Moreover, it has been argued that children's agency cannot be explored as an inner feature of individual children because ideas about children's agency are tightly connected to moral and political ideas about what kinds of agency are appropriate for children in specific cultural contexts (Bordonaro 2012). Therefore, a more critical, nuanced, dynamic and complex conception of agency is necessary: one which considers the contextual, structural, moral and political aspects of children's agency.

Additionally, there seems to be a gap between advocacy for children's agency as a principle and the realisation of this principle in practice (Bordonaro 2012; Punch 2016). As Houen et al. (2016) noted, early childhood policies and programmes in various countries advocate for agency as a right of children. However, some research has found that children's opportunities to influence decision-making and control their own lives in institutional education are significantly limited by unyielding institutional structures and traditional adult-directed educational cultures and practices (Hudson 2012; Kivioja and Puroila 2017). This is even more evident when children move from child-care settings to primary schools. Previous research has shown that, as historically and culturally constructed institutions, primary schools and educational settings for children under school age exhibit different educational practices. According to Ballam et al. (2017), a key difference is the emphasis on a play-based pedagogical approach in preschool settings and the structured and goal-oriented formal pedagogy evident in primary schools.

Finally, previous research has pointed out the lack of empirical research on children's experiences of their agentic rights in specific contexts of their daily lives (see Bjerke 2011; Harcourt and Hägglund 2013). This study contributes to international early childhood education research by addressing children's experiences on agency in daily life within a Finnish primary school context. We approach children's agency as a complex, tension-filled phenomenon in which children's agency emerges through the dynamic interactions that occur between children and the social, material, political and moral context of the primary school, as identified by Bordonaro (2012). We apply a phenomenological methodology to examine children's experiences of their agency.

Children's Agency in the Context of a Primary School

The concept of agency has close connections to other concepts, including participation, citizenship and belonging (see Bjerke 2011; Mentha et al. 2015). Agency is commonly understood as humans' capacity to choose, act and influence matters in their everyday lives (e.g. Houen et al. 2016; James and James 2012; Mentha et al. 2015). Agency often involves creating action, including questioning, opposing and acting differently (e.g. Kumpulainen et al. 2010). In this study, we view agency as a complex and tension-filled phenomenon that may depend on other actors, institutional structures, morality and power relations (Gurdal and Sorbring 2018; Hohti and Karlsson 2012). We were inspired by studies that considered the dialectics, interdependencies and tensions that frame the realisation of agency (Gurdal and Sorbring 2018; Rainio and Hilppö 2017).

In this research, we focus on the primary school context, where children are often dependent on their teachers' decisions and actions which can enable or prevent children's agency (Rainio and Hilppö 2017; Ruscoe et al. 2018). The school context is mainly determined by adult perspectives. School classes, lunchrooms, outdoor areas, gyms and the curricula are largely controlled by adults (James and James 2012). The pedagogical relationship between children and teachers presupposes some form of coercion by adults, which Rainio and Hilppö (2017) referred to as 'the paradox of pedagogy' (p. 87). When teachers create practices and structures to support children's agency, they have to accept that these structures may instead constrain children's agency and that pedagogical actions can both close and open opportunities for children's participation. Likewise, children can also promote or prevent other children's agency through their actions (Kustatscher 2017).

Recent studies highlight the importance of drawing attention to children's experiences, thoughts and activities (e.g. Gurdal–Sorbring 2018; Lipponen et al. 2018; Ruscoe et al. 2018). It is important for children to feel that their actions have meaning and that adults listen to their ideas. However, it may be challenging for teachers and parents to support the agency of every child. Previous research has argued that it may be easier for teachers to recognise and support children who are active and willing to participate than children who are more passive and spend time preoccupied with their own thoughts (Rainio and Hilppö 2017). In this study, we attempt to capture different children's experiences of their agency within a primary school context.

Methodology

This research was conducted in one primary school located in a small city in northern Finland. In Finland, children start pre-primary education when they are 6 years old. After 1 year, they move to the first grade of a primary school. Although the operating environments of pre-primary education and primary education are harmonised, children experience a distinctive change in their social relationships and physiological space when they enter first grade. The children take on the role of the schoolchild, which challenges the children's perception of themselves as learners and active agents (Soini et al. 2013).

Although the National Core Curriculum (2016) in Finland defines the principal learning goals of primary schools, teaching methods and practices depend greatly on teachers' choices. In Finland, first graders' school days usually last about four hours and include both lessons and breaks. In the school in which this study was conducted, the school day was divided into 45-min lessons and 15-min breaks. There was a lunch break in the middle of the day. The children usually spent their breaks outdoors, the school bell is rung to indicate when break time is over, and the children have to come inside. In this school, there were two first-grade classes. Each class had two teachers, as well as a special education teacher, who engaged in co-teaching. They divided the children into smaller groups according to the children's needs. There were also three school assistants.

Participants and Researchers

Sixteen children, aged 7 years, were participants in this research. There were eight girls and eight boys who participated across the two different first-grade classrooms. There were a total of 27 children across these classes. Author 1 has a background as a primary school teacher and as a special education teacher. She had had previous contact with the participating school and was responsible for recruiting the children. The children did not know the author in advance.

Permission to conduct the study was received from educational authorities at the municipal level, as well as from parents and their children, class teachers, special education teachers and school assistants. Author 1 informed the parents about the research at a parents' meeting. The parents discussed the study and completed the consent form, together with their children. This ensured that children were aware that participation in the study was voluntary and that they had the right to withdraw from the research at any time. This is important for the realisation of children's agency in research (Greig et al. 2007). In addition, Author 1 also visited the first-grade classrooms to discuss the research with the children. The class teachers collected the ethical consent forms signed by the parents and their children. One child did not want to take photographs, which was a part of the research process, despite the signed consent from the child and her/his parents. Author 1 interpreted this as a reluctance to participate, and this child was not subsequently included as a participant.

The involvement of the authors in this research project was as follows: Author 1 was responsible for collecting and transcribing the research material (and referred to as Interviewer in the data excerpts). Author 2 analysed the data with the first author and participated in writing the article. Author 3 joined the research process at the end of the analysis phase, participated in discussing the findings and supported the writing of this article.

Data Collection

The research material consisted of photographs taken by the children and discussions between the children and Author 1, after the photographing session. Initially, Author 1 showed the children a series of pictures to help them understand what was involved in participating in this study. According to Greig et al. (2007), it is important that children need to understand how their involvement in the research may affect them in practice. The pictures used to explain the research process remained in the classroom for the duration of the data collection (see Fig. 1). The children generated the research material by taking photographs, which related to their different experiences at school: What is funny? What is unfortunate? These prompts were selected to motivate children to look at the school environment from different perspectives and to discuss both positive and negative experiences. Photographs taken by children are considered an important way to explore experiences in children's daily lives (Dockett et al. 2017; Einarsdottir 2018).

Pairs of children took pictures using a tablet. Each pair had four hours to take photographs during a school day. However, there were children who did not remember to take pictures and, therefore, the photography time was extended into the next day. This seemed to indicate that some children were not highly motivated to take

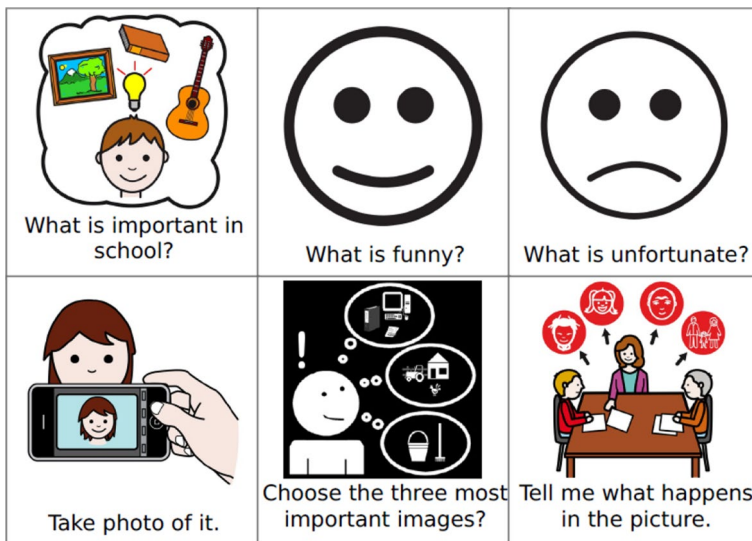


Fig. 1 Figures used to explain the research task to the children (CC Papunet Figure Bank)

pictures. The children were then asked to choose three of their most important pictures and to explain to the researcher why they had taken them. This gave the children control over what they could say and promoted their agency and participation in the research process (Oh, 2012). Within the discussion with the researcher, the children displayed their pictures and explained the kind of emotions and experiences that the photographs illustrated for them. The discussions were audio-recorded and the photographs were saved to the researcher's computer after the discussions with the children.

The lively reality of school was present in the photographs and what the children said in the discussions. In general, the children discussed the photographs with positive emotions and there was much laughter. Often, the subject of the picture raised discussion between children. However, while some children talked openly about their pictures, others spoke less. The researcher asked questions about the pictures to encourage the children to share their experiences of school life. According to Karlsson (2012), children's answers to long questions are often brief, if the researcher is the initiator and leader and takes up much of the talk time. Therefore, the researcher deliberately tried to avoid guiding the comments provided by the children and accepted that some children would be less talkative.

In the approach to the discussions about their photographs, a phenomenological approach was used (Giorgi 1994). Phenomenological theory describes the ways in which the world is experienced by individuals (Merleau-Ponty 1988). This approach was manifested in the discussions with the children by a series of self-critical questions which the researcher used to ensure her understanding of the child's experiential world. Reflective questions included: How should we, as adult researchers, interact with a child? To what extent can an adult researcher explore and understand a child's experiential world? Every effort was made to provide the children with enough psychological space to express their own ideas about their experiences and accommodate each individual child with as much openness as possible. Although the research was conducted in the school context, the researcher consciously attempted to direct attention away from school affairs in order to give children opportunities to share their own points of view. However, development of a close relationship between the researcher and the children would have required a longer period of time in the school, and additionally the number of pictures was limited.

Data Analysis

In the research process, data analysis, interpretation and writing were intertwined. We proceeded inductively and did not use any predetermined units of analysis, classification criteria or theory. It was presumed that the children's photographs allowed them to freely talk about what they felt and experienced. In the first phase of the analysis, Author 1 transcribed the data and reviewed the material. The transcribed material consisted of 76 pages of written text with line spacing of 1.5 and which was combined with the children's photographs. To protect children's confidentiality, only child gender is reported (B representing boys and G representing girls).

In the second phase, the analysis proceeded as a dialogue about the research material between Author 1 and Author 2. The authors challenged each other's interpretations and searched for children's experiences embedded within the nature of the photographs taken by the children and the transcripts of the discussions. Through the second phase, the authors were able to identify meaningful themes that children had captured in their photographs and expressed in the conversational discussions. These themes were playing, moving, playtime, friends, teachers, different activities and learning new skills. The next task was to identify the kind of phenomena that permeated these themes. The authors concluded by choosing the notion of children's agency. As is important to phenomenological research, the focal point of the study was found in the participants' experiential world.

In the third phase, Author 3 joined the process. The research group sought to deepen understanding of children's experiences of agency by reflecting on the identified themes in the data and making connections with the previous research literature on children's agency. We noted that the themes contained elements that both enabled and constrained children's agency. In the third phase of analysis, four perspectives that characterised children's experiences of agency in school were identified and are reported in the next section.

Findings

This research explored how agency was apparent in children's photographs of significant school experiences and their discussions of the photographs, from 16 children who were enrolled in first grade of a Finnish primary school. Four themes were identified from the photographs and discussions which enabled or constrained children's agency. These themes were social order of school; teacher's pedagogical tools; break times out of the classroom; and learning new skills.

Social Order of the School Frames Children's Agency

During the school day, children's agency was largely determined by the school's social order, which is based on tradition, culture and schedules. This social order was visible in the children's pictures of lessons and textbooks, classroom breaks and the lunchroom. During the discussions between the researcher and the children, the school bell rang. The children reacted strongly to this and began to hurry to their next lesson, even though they had their teachers' permission to continue the discussion. This illustrated Pacini-Ketchabaw's (2012) notion of the tyranny of the clock in an educational context. The children participating in this study had adjusted to the time-based social order of the school day that is typical in a Finnish school context. The clock on the teacher's table showed the children how long they had to complete assigned tasks (Fig. 2). Their agency was limited when the teacher wanted the children to focus on a particular task.

Interviewer: What is this? [timer on the table]

Girl: Well, it is a kind of a watch, which... well one can put time in it.

Fig. 2 Whiteboard and teacher's table



Boy: Like a timer.

Interviewer: Yes. Does it measure, then, that time has now been spent?

Boy: And from zero to there. And then when it is at zero, the time has run out.

One boy's photograph shows a timetable comprised of pictures on his desk. Pictures might help children who cannot yet read to understand how the school day is structured. Both the timetable and the clock indicated how the primary school is an institution with its own social order that defines children's time as divided into lessons and playtime. Figure 3 shows a book on one of the children's desks and a timetable in pictures. It appeared that the child chose the book from the library.

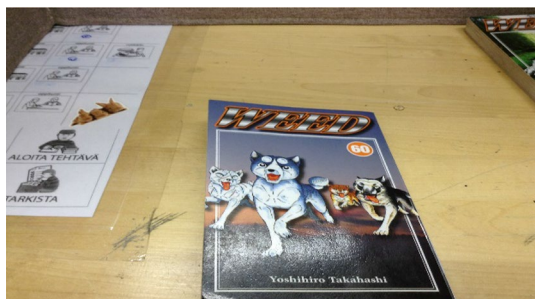
Boy: I was looking at the book.

Interviewer: Okay. When are you allowed to read that book?

Boy: When teachers say.

This quote indicates that the child's opportunity to read the book was limited; it was the adult's role to define when children could participate in desired activities

Fig. 3 Timetable and a book



(e.g. reading the book). In line with previous studies, these two examples reveal that the children were directed to work within the social order of the school which pertained to many written and unwritten rules and routines (see Puroila et al. 2012; Thornberg 2008). The study thus shows how tightly children's experiences of their agency are framed by the pedagogical and institutional cultures of the primary school.

Teachers' Pedagogical Tools Both Enable and Constrain Children's Agency

The teachers used a variety of pedagogical tools to guide children to engage in appropriate activities and behaviour. These tools were visual, concrete, colourful and playful, and they seemed to take into account children's age and developmental needs. Pictures were used to inform children and give feedback on their behaviour and performance. For example, Fig. 2 shows an image on the left corner of the whiteboard that looks like a traffic light, which the teachers used to guide the children to follow classroom rules. The green light indicated that the children were behaving properly; the yellow light served as a warning; and the red light indicated that the children had behaved inappropriately. Children who behaved well received concrete rewards (Houen et al. 2016), such as smiley faces from the teachers.

Interviewer: Is it [picture] from the school whiteboard?

Girl: Yes.

Interviewer: Do you then have...? These [traffic lights on the whiteboard] are tags of different colours...

Boy: Well, those are the ones that belong to the smiley faces.

Juutinen and Viljamaa (2016) noted that pedagogical tools such as traffic lights can be used both to support children's participation in class and as a method of control and discipline. Similarly, in the current study, the traffic lights were used to reward well-behaved children and discipline those who did not behave in the way the teachers wanted. Moreover, picture cards reminded children of the classroom rules. Figure 4 shows an example of a common rule in the school context: children need to ask for permission to speak by raising a hand.

At the end of the school day, the children who received smiley faces were allowed to spend time playing freely or engaging in other pleasant activities. As the following excerpt shows, this period, called 'the star-time', appeared to depend on how well the children followed the class rules and the teacher's instructions.

Interviewer: What do you think is the most boring thing in school?

Boy: I don't know. I can't play with friends.

Interviewer: Really? But....

Girl: We are allowed to play during star-time, but he doesn't have the star-time.

Interviewer: What is star-time?

Boy: We can play.

Girl: At the end of a school day, if we got smiley faces.

Interviewer: How can one get those smiley faces then?

Girl: Well, if one is behaving nicely.

Fig. 4 Asking permission to speak by raising a hand



Interviewer: And who will give those smiley faces?

Girl: The teacher.

Because star-time served as a reward for some children and as a punishment for others, children were placed in a competitive relationship with each other (see Hohti and Karlsson 2012). However, studies have shown that following school rules and routines is an essential part of being a learner (Ruscoe et al. 2018). The teacher can use smiley faces as an instrument of adult power. Those children who did not comply with the standards could not enjoy the playtime which restricted their agency. Thus, the everyday lives of children in a school context could be characterised by inequality in terms of agency. Also, the pedagogical tools mentioned above strengthened the categorisation of children into well-behaving and badly behaving groups. As the excerpt above shows, the children are aware of which children belong to each category.

The 'sun of good behaviour' was also used as a pedagogical tool in the classroom. Each day, the teacher set behavioural goals for the children. Later, the children were asked to evaluate their behaviour and add their 'ray' to the sun if they had behaved well.

Boy: And on the door, there is one kind of sun thingy - a circle and everyone's names in it. And if the objective is I speak politely, if you speak, then you can put in your ray'

Girl: If we have done like... Today our objective of the day is 'I listen to instructions', so if I listen to... There are many objectives of the day....

Girl: And if one does it then one gets that one ray....

Interviewer: Oh, a ray? Their own ray, then, to the sun?

Girl: Yes. But only if one has like ... listened to the instructions or does what it says all the time.

Interviewer: What, can that person then, like, think on their own that 'How did I do today', 'Did I listen to the instructions'? The teacher doesn't say?

Girl: Yes, but you can think that yourself?'

The theme of the child's self-assessment was her/his obedience to the teacher's goals or rules. The children could clearly see whose rays were in the sun and whose rays were not. This underlines the categorisation of children. In this study, the teacher's pedagogical tools seemed to have a twofold function: on the one hand, the tools contributed to some children's agency and strengthened their sense of belonging and, on the other hand, the same tools restricted other children's agency and separated children from each other.

Breaks Provide Potential Time and Space for Children's Agency

The data indicated that the breaks were pleasant for children. Breaks allowed children to pause their studies and play with their friends. As noted in other studies, breaks provided potential time and space for children's agency through joint play and social interaction (Kyrönlampi 2014). Children's photographs and discussions emphasised closeness with nature and biodiversity as part of play, reflecting the strong relationship that the Finnish population have with nature (Saito 2010). The children took photographs of sand, roots, sticks and stones and talked about how they utilised these items in their imaginary play. As noted in previous research (Rainio and Hilppö 2017), children's agency is visible not only in their actions but also in their imaginations, dreams and ideas.

During the breaks, the children had the right and opportunity to play together with their friends. For the children, the schoolyard was a place for leisure, and they actively used the whole schoolyard for their play. However, the adults also controlled and regulated children's agency during the breaks.

Girl: But it is sad that our teacher said that big pupils are not allowed to come to the school yard of little pupils. [Instructions given on the central radio earlier the same day.]

Interviewer: I wonder why it is that the big pupils are not allowed to come to the school yard of little pupils.

Girl: Because it ...

Boy: Because there won't be quarrels.

Girl: Because there won't be any accidents.

Interviewer: Is it that there has been some quarrels because they announced it?

Girl: There have been no quarrels or accidents, but the teacher still announced it.

In this study, the children noted that older children were not allowed to enter their schoolyard during the breaks. It was hard for them to understand the reason for this rule because they had played with older children previously. This categorised children into 'big' and 'small' children and limited their collaboration. In this example, the adults served as rule-makers and played a primary role in the decision-making process (see Bjerke 2011). In a school context, the school's social order and hierarchies provided limitations to the children's places and social interactions during the breaks (Rajala et al. 2015).

Factors other than rules could also restrict children's movement and agency in the schoolyard. For instance, there was a hole in the long jump area of the schoolyard, which one child described as an unsafe issue for play in the following excerpt (Fig. 5).

Girl: The worst is that there is a hole in the long jump place.

Interviewer: So, you have a photo of that long jump place [in the schoolyard]? Yes, so what kind of a hole is there, then?

Girl: Before, there has been a big hole, but also another thing is there.

Interviewer: What kind of thing?

Girl: 'Cause there are rocks there.

Interviewer: Yes, well, how do they bother you there?

Girl: Well, in a way that if you do a long jump, you can, if you fall down, your knee might start bleeding and your pants broken.

Aside from the place for long jumps, there were other places, such as climbing bars, where the children could test their physical skills. For the first graders of this study, it was an achievement to sit on the high bar. The bigger children were even able to pull tricks while hanging on the bars. The joint play and stunts on the climbing bars were positive events for the children that promoted their experiences of agency and sense of belonging in a peer group.

Learning New Skills Enables Children's Agency

Children's photographs and discussions also revealed their joy of learning and being able to complete different tasks by themselves (see Puroila 2019). Learning and new skills increased children's experiences of their agency and abilities to operate in a world largely structured by adults. In the school context, adults expect children to learn, as one of the main goals of institutional education. As noted in previous research, positive learning experiences and achievements are crucial for children's agency (Ruscoe et al. 2018). The following picture and excerpt show an example of a situation in which completion of a task produced joy for a child (Fig. 6).

Fig. 5 A hole in the long jump area





Fig. 6 Mathematics book

Interviewer: What do you have there?

Girl: A math book.

Interviewer: Why did you choose the math book?

Girl: Because it is nice.

Interviewer: You like counting.

Girl: And I want to learn to count until one hundred.

Interviewer: And until where can you count?

Girl: Guess? Until twenty.

In order to experience the joy of learning, children need to feel capable of performing the tasks assigned by their teachers and perceive these tasks as relevant and interesting (Ruscoe et al. 2018). In this study, the joy of learning was not only connected to so-called academic skills, such as numeracy and literacy, but also to arts and crafts, which allowed the children to utilise their creativity. The children took several pictures of their own artwork (Fig. 7).

Boy: I will show you which one is my bird. That one.

Fig. 7 Artwork depicting a bird



Interviewer: Ok. What kind of a bird is it there?

Boy: The chick of this, my chick.

Interviewer: How have you made it?

Boy: We have been crocheting those...

Girl: It is so that... We use a carton as like a base. After that we crocheted like one kind of sticks. And we like glued them.

Children who said that they disliked mathematics and had difficulties with appropriate behaviour were especially interested in taking photographs of their artwork. Art provided them with experiences of success and thus increased their sense of agency. Arts and crafts provided children with choice in what they could do in school.

Arts, crafts and play were also combined with the practice involving 'a box of good mood', which contained a small toy from a child's home. The children could not automatically take the box of good mood; they had to ask permission from the teacher. If the child was in a bad mood, the teacher could allow him or her to open the box and play with their own toy. These boxes were important to the children, and they decorated the boxes themselves. This practice seemed to have the potential to help children manage feelings and support the development of emotional skills.

Discussion

In this study, we described children's experiences of their daily lives in a primary school context and their agentic rights from a critical perspective. In accordance with the Convention of the Rights of the Child (United Nations 1989), we invited children to participate in the study and listened to their reports of agency, which they expressed through photographs and discussions. The children had just moved from a pre-primary school environment to primary school. This was a significant transition because it involved a shift from the play-based pedagogical approach emphasised in pre-school settings to the more structured and adult-directed approach of primary schools (Ballam et al. 2017). Thus, the shift had the potential to affect children's sense of agency.

The findings showed that children's agency was largely structured and limited by adults. The school's social order played a crucial role in the children's daily school life. In the school context, there is continuous balancing between children's freedom and adults' power and authority (Puroila et al. 2012). Breaks in the schoolyard, imaginative activities, play with friends and learning new things, were among activities that seemed to strengthen the first graders' sense of agency. These moments allowed children to have freedom and space to enjoy their activities and develop their abilities. Some matters, such as a hole in the long jump area, seemed unimportant to the adults but were significant for the children as they hindered children's agency and limited their activities in the breaks.

The study also showed that certain pedagogical tools and practices enhanced some children's agency but at the same time restricted others' agency. Strikingly, the children were aware and able to verbalise that different children had different

opportunities to play and be rewarded for good behaviour. Categorisation of children into well-behaving, obedient children versus rule breakers was meaningful to children and would affect their sense of control and agency.

The limitations of this study include its focus on only one primary school and the small number of participants. It is possible that school cultures may vary across schools and municipalities but the findings of this study do challenge all schools to develop inclusive cultures in which children's perspectives are actively sought and provide opportunities to build a sense of agency. This does not mean that children should be given unrestricted freedom but could be a better balance between children's opportunities for autonomy and teachers' authority.

Conclusions

For three decades, the Convention of the Rights of the Child (United Nations 1989) has promoted children's opportunities to influence decision-making and to be heard in matters that affect them. This study, however, reveals that the realisation of children's agentic rights is a complex and challenging issue in the institutional context of primary school. The study highlights that children's experiences of agency are largely framed by teachers' authority and the social and moral order of the school culture. The pedagogical tools and school practices function as mechanisms through which children are categorised and their agentic rights distributed unequally. The study challenges teachers to pay special attention to classroom practices that may categorise children.

Opportunities for children's agency occur when teachers who work with young children listen closely to children's voices in order to strengthen children's personal confidence in their abilities and competence that indicates respect for children in order to support a sense of personal agency. This can be challenging for teachers in diverse classroom when different needs need to be accommodated. As found in this research, activities that provided open-ended opportunities for learning, such as arts and crafts, were especially valued by children. These activities enabled children to have greater choice and control in what and how they could learn. How such opportunities can be extended across the curriculum may also be an important consideration.

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