Educators' Perspectives on Children's Agency in Foreign Language Early Childhood Education and Care

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ABSTRACT

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The topic of children's agency has gained attention since the ratification of the UN Convention on the rights of the child (1989). Internationally, it has been widely studied and in various contexts, among which education. In the Finnish National core curriculum for early childhood education and care (2019) importance is placed on the child as being 'heard, seen, noticed and understood as himself or herself and as a member of his or her community' (p. 27). Previous studies in Finland recognizes that, despite policy and educators' efforts, children's agency is often challenging in practice.

The purpose of this study is to investigate educators' perspectives of children's agency in foreign language early childhood education and care settings (ECEC). Contrary to most previous studies, here the attention is on routine activities. The data for this research was collected through small group interviews with educators from two kindergartens in the Capital area of Finland.

The results show the relational nature of agency in ECEC and its dependence on environmental factors. Educators described it as children's strive for a change, characterised by negotiation and shared responsibility with the educators. They also acknowledged the hindering and supporting role the organizational culture had through pedagogy and routines. The results could be used to reflect theory and practice at work.

Key words: children's agency, ECEC, organizational culture, educators' view

CONTENTS

1 INTRODUCTION

Literature on children's agency discusses the child from a multitude of perspectives. Childhood is seen as a phase of life in which rapid growth takes place or as a social experience affected by outside circumstances, present in a certain moment in time. For developmental psychology, the early years of life include intense physical and psychological changes, as well as significant progress in social and emotional development (Durlak, Domitrovich, Weissberg, Gullotta, 2015). For sociology and anthropology, children and their capacities are often affected by historical and cultural views (Schaffer, 2004) with political, economic, philosophical and social changes influencing differently every generation. The common denominator among these perspectives, however, is the child as changing, "leaving and absenting former places to enter new future ones" (Alderson & Yoshida, 2016, p. 83).

Whether seen as a period of the life span, characterised by developmental changes, or as a generational cohort, influenced by social activities, childhood is generally associated with intense learning about the world and the way things are done. For Vygotsky, this learning involves interactions between novices and experienced partners, while for Piaget, learning is about acquiring conceptual understanding through maturation (Schaffer, 2004). Both theories have shaped formal education for decades, however, in later years, the attention has been shifted towards the learner as an active participant in the construction of their learning and mutually co-constructing shared meaning with others (Lipponen, Kumpulainen & Paananen, 2018; Pramling et al, 2019).

The topic of this study centers around children's agency, as seen by educators, in routine activities. It also addresses a less studied representation of ECEC in the Finnish context - the foreign language setting.

Bandura (2001) defines agency as a conscious effort on behalf of the

individual to move from one state to another. Agency requires self-efficiency ("determinants of human behavior", p. 1175), forethought ("future time perspective", p. 1179) and anticipated results ("valued outcomes", p. 1180) (Bandura, 1989). Waller, Withmarsh and Clarke (2011) offer a similar definition consistent of three steps. First is recognizing one's ability to influence their environment. Reflecting one's own motivation for promoting changes follows as step two. The third step involves taking actions - fulfilling - one's goal. Agency as a process of negotiating new positions, is dependent on the self, the others and the environment. It uses existing patterns and behaviours to achieve desired outcomes but also generates new knowledge.

Important to explain here is that I have intentionally chosen the term agency rather than participation, even though the two are sometimes used as synonyms. Waller and Bitou (2011) offer an explanation about the difference between participation and agency. According to them, participation stands for "children's right to participate in processes and decisions that affect their lives" (p. 107), while agency means "children's capacity to understand and act upon their world" (p. 103). In the research context, participation seems to be used more often to describe practical, everyday inclusion of children in the organizational life, while agency usually refers to a more abstract understanding of children as having a minority group status.

Hewitt (2011) defines Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) as preparing children for school and life by ensuring their social-emotional and physical development, as well as supporting their cognitive learning. In a similar manner, the Finnish ECEC curriculum (2019) underlines that learning takes place not only in teacher-organized activities but also daily routines, such as eating, sleeping, play, etc.

Conducting this study in foreign language ECEC context gave an alternative perspective that has not been extensively studied. According to Kersten and Rohde (2013) learning a foreign language at an early age is a social and cultural experience. Foreign language environment in Finnish ECEC represents child-care providers who cater to both Finnish and foreign clients

and employ both Finnish and foreign personnel. The language of instruction is other than Finnish (in this case English), however, pedagogically, the providers follow the Finnish traditions and legislation.

The purpose of this research was to collect educators' understanding of children's agency in routine activities. Using small group interviews provided the opportunity for educators to freely discuss and reflect on their practical experiences with familiar others. The results pointed at the relational aspects of children's agency, as well as the effect the organizational culture had on it.

I begin my study with a look on what literature has to say about children's agency in regard to what is it, who is involved and where it takes place.

2 CONCEPTUALIZING CHILDREN'S AGENCY IN THIS STUDY

In this section, I provide a concept of children's agency, based on different perspectives and definitions. As relevant to this particular study stood three characteristics regarding children's agency - as originating from the sociocultural or developmental, as being superficial or equal and as representing rights or voices. Even though these aspects overlap and often the discussion covers similar ideas, by separating them in such a way, I attempt to underline their importance to understanding children's agency.

2.1 Sociocultural or Developmental Origins

Historically, children have often been represented as separate from adults, on the path of becoming physically and psychologically mature. Their progress towards that final stage of being has been measured by adult-created categories for cognitive, emotional, social and physical competences, where a child is seen as normal, deviating or pathological in comparison to others. In other words, childhood often stands for categorizing children and their development in order for adults "to make sense of, regulate, and promote children's lives, growth and well-being" (Christensen and James, 2008, p. 13).

In a similar line of thought, children are described as having a standard skill set and behaviours (Woodhead, 1999). The idea of something 'standardised' implies that children are the same despite individual, generational or cultural differences. Children should not be perceived only in terms of measured growth and development against specific standards but also as participants in the socio-cultural processes taking place in the immediate environment. Therefore, Woodhead (1999) proposes a view on children that acknowledges their social status rather than their stage of development. Similarly, James (2009) contrasts preparing the "inadequate, incomplete and dependent" (p. 37) child for adulthood with the child who is actively trying to

make sense of the adult world and is deeply involved in the construction of their own life.

James and James (2012) question the idea of Lee (2001) of 'becoming' and 'being' regarding childhood and adulthood. James (2003; James and James, 2012) challenges defining children by their lack of adult-like physical and psychological maturity, while Pugh (2014) question the notion of "children as outcomes upon which other factors impinge, rather than as actors with their own effects on a variegated process of social construction." (p. 76). Pugh (2014) also brings up the conflict between recognizing children's dependence but also their self-sufficiency; taking care but also empowering them; meeting their needs but also recognizing their rights.

The 'being' vs. 'becoming' is also present in the discussion of agency. According to Clarke, Howley, Resnick and Rosé (2016) sociology "conceptualizes agency as a function of social structures within which individuals are embedded, whereas, psychological traditions conceptualize agency as a self-regulatory capacity of an individual" (p. 29). While the first view places the emphasis on the interaction among different agents, the second one focuses on the individual development of the agent. Rajala, Kumpulainen, Rainio, Hilppö and Lipponen (2016) (based on Engeström, 2015; Vygotsky, 1997) describe agency as a developmental process present from birth and throughout the whole lifespan. This theory effectively puts the idea of children as 'becomings' and adults as 'beings' to question and, together with modern trends of disappearing stability in adulthood, bridges the generational gap between children and adults and proposes a life-long universal state of 'becoming' (Walkerdine, 2008). Bridging the gap between adults and children puts them on a more even footing. It suggests a more complex view on children as both equal contributors to the social context and constantly changing individuals. A new question emerges, however, whether this equality is genuine or superficial.

2.2 Being Superficial or Real

The importance of individual and social factors for agency became evident in the previous section. Being an active agent suggests an amalgam of internal characteristics (intentionality, self-regulation and self-reflectiveness) and external sociocultural influences (Bandura, 2001, Abstract). Introducing external factors necessitates an ability from the child to "negotiate and interact with their environment [to cause] changes" (Waller et al., 2011, p. 103). The nature of these changes, however, could be a subject of debate - do they represent a meaningful participation of children in social processes or a "tokenistic" one, as defined by Hart (1992), aimed at appeasing proponents of children's agency.

On one hand, Waller and Bitou (2011) cite Qvortrup (2009) on adults also being "social products in society" (p. 104), therefore, agency is not simply a human impulse but a socially, culturally and behaviourally built response to outside stimuli supported by personal motivation. On the other hand, Rajala et al. (2016) suggest that children's agency is "domesticated" with adults "holding ultimate control over the endpoints" (p. 25).

Valentine (2011) discusses different perspectives on children's agency as superficial or as genuine albeit different. In the first instance, children are consulted and considered but their ultimate involvement in decisions lies in the hands of the adults. As for the second instance, children participate to the extent of their wishes and capabilities, with their level of skills and knowledge appropriately respected. While the superficial view supports the idea of children as incompetent and incapable (therefore, questioning their equality to adults), the second celebrates the differences between children and adults in reconstructing the social context. Valentine (2011) also mentions that children's agency is often theorized and interpreted by adults and in adult views and terms, making children's understanding and expression insignificant. This again leads to seeing children as less - as unstable, incapable, unable based on their physiological and psychological development, and as rather dependent on adults. As a result, Valentine (2011) argues that a definition of agency should include a "recognition of [children's] specific needs and vulnerabilities and

recognition of their universal capacities" (p. 348).

Valentine (2011) juxtaposes defining agency as taking actions with an intent and as acting based on understanding of consequences. Taking such perspective on agency - as something that requires a moral maturity - theoretically disqualifies children from being agentic because "their developmental immaturity is equated with non-rationality and emotion; and whose actions are and choices are constrained by their dependence on adults" (Valentine, 2011, p. 351). Put in simple terms, this would mean that children cannot be considered equal contributors to changes because it is assumed that they are not capable of predicting consequences. However, Van Lier (2008) argues that being agentic is about executing actions in a given situation rather than possessing a certain set of skills.

The ongoing debate about children's agentic status as socially constructed or controlled by adults, leads to another crucial question. Similarly to this one, it concerns the involvement of the adult in establishing the origins of children's agency. The next section looks at the debate on agency as inborn or given.

2.3 Representing Rights or Voices

While the previous section looked at children's agency in terms of its equality to adults, here the main argument centers around the origin of agency. The topic here brings a slightly political nuance to the discussion - that of agency as belonging to the disadvantaged and oppressed (Percy-Smith B., Thomas N., 2009; Hart, 1992). Despite the efforts of the UN Convention of the rights of the child (1989), children in many cultures are not allowed and are even discouraged to exercise power (Pufall et al., 2003) as defined by Western developed countries. Empowering children in their present state of childhood poses the question whether agency exists and belongs to every person or is granted by one group to another.

According to Waller et al. (2011), agency is viewed as inborn, assigned to every individual upon birth. The same authors also argue that, for children to

become agentic, they need to "actively explore options necessary for active participation" (Waller et al., 2011, p. 107). Therefore, for agency to take place, both internal, conscious motivation from the agent and external predisposition from the environment must exist. Agency incorporates the social and cultural origins of the individual (Van Lier, 2008), the individual's level of maturity (Valentine, 2011) but also their social interactions (Mäkitalo, 2016). It represents the negotiation between the individual and the social, it is available but to be effective and understood by others, it requires nurturing and support. Mäkitalo (2016) explains further that the conscious effort of the individual to reflect and transform their current state to a future one is not solely determined by maturity and social structure. Instead, it is influenced by cultural means embedded in social interactions, hinting that agency is not something given or inborn but created through negotiations among agents.

In this section the question whether agency is inborn or gifted was considered. The answer seems to depend on the perspective one decides to take about agency - as a right of the disadvantaged or as an inborn characteristic. An alternative answer emerged - agency as created by the participants in the social context. As it is built on interaction among individuals, understanding of each other was also considered as influential. The next chapter explores further the idea of interacting with others.

3 RELATIONAL AGENCY

From the discussion in the previous chapter, interactions between children and adults take central place in children's agency. This chapter continues to explore this view by looking at children making sense of the adult world, educators as co-constructors and the relational aspect in the educational context.

3.1 Children Making Sense of the Adult World

The idea of fostering in children a "sense of themselves as conscious actors in the world" (Brown, 2009, p. 172) has been growing in popularity in the past decades. Lansdown (2009) argues that children are capable of understanding the world around them and having their own opinions about it, despite the less competent status assigned to them by adults.

In Corsaro's (2003) observations of children in ECEC settings, he noticed that they often broke out of the role assigned to them by challenging adults' rules. Waller et al. (2001), based on Corsaro (2005a), suggest that children perceived adult-initiated activities as irritating, scary and unclear and acted out in an attempt "to make sense of the adult's world" (p. 108). They continue by referring as agentic to "the definitions and meaning children give to their own lives" (Waller et al., 2011, p. 103).

Rejecting or modifying the adult order, could be seen as both positive or negative and essentially depends on the perspective of the adult. Children's agency could be perceived by adults as a quiet submission or violent defiance. Despite the potential conflict children's activeness could cause, it should be encouraged as it builds on the "practical knowledge about context-dependent, variable scopes from which they can draw when participating in practices in the future" (Esser, Baader, Betz, & Hungerland, 2016, p. 44).

Some authors offer an alternative look on agency. Esser et al. (2016) characterize it as creative, conscious, cognitive, reflective. According to Percy-Smith and Thomas (2009) children use non-verbal and creative

approaches to express themselves and require time, safe space and enough information, as well as encouragement and support to explain their thoughts and preferences. For Pramling and Pramling Samuelsson (2011, based on research by Emilson, 2008) it is also important that adults attempt "closeness to the child's perspective, emotional presence and playfulness" (p. 158). Despite their limited life experience, children are much more capable in terms of understanding than previously believed. Lansdown (2009) suggests that "information, experience, social and cultural expectations and levels of support all contribute to the development of children's capacities" (p. 12). Children might not be fluent in the language (usually verbal) that adults use and understand, however they can communicate through creative, body/face expressions and play. The idea that children "have their own perspectives, as well as their own knowledge, beliefs, motivations" (2012, p. 41) is also supported by Whitebread. Children are capable of logical reasoning if given the same context and information as adults and in a way they can relate to. However, Whitebread (2012) also acknowledges that children lack the experience that adults have but warns against considering this a disadvantage.

Interestingly, Bandura (2001) warns that not everyone has the necessary resources for agency. As a result, children engage in proxy agency when they lack or have not developed these, therefore they employ adults to achieve desired outcomes. Colwell and colleagues (2015), however, stress the importance of providing space for children to be independent but also responsible at an appropriate level to experiment, make decisions, choices and mistakes and learn from them. Educational settings are a good example of a place where children and adults form a collective efficacy, where the individuals compliment each other for the realization of common goals.

Agency is often seen in terms of challenging, making sense of the adult world, or cooperating towards a common goal. As it becomes evident from the previous sections, these cannot be achieved without cooperation with others.

3.2 Adults as Co-Constructors

This section looks at the influence of the adult on children's agency. As this study took place in an educational context, I focus on the educators. When used, the term 'teachers' refers to educators working with children under the age of seven, rather than primary or upper level teachers.

In ECEC settings, the educator is considered an expert on development in early childhood (Theobald et al., 2011). Theobald et al. (2011) argue, however, that this needs to change towards a state where collaboration with children forms the core of ECEC. Other authors (Tobin, 1997; Hewitt, 2011) focus on the ECEC teacher as an enforcer of the organizational structure responsible for enabling, providing, controlling, monitoring but also being flexible and giving children attention, acknowledgement and appreciation. According to Colwell et al. (2015), ECEC teachers need to be knowledgeable, experienced, reflective and good critical thinkers but also respectful and sensitive. The authors also caution against teachers assuming about children's thoughts, feelings or intentions rather than listening to children's voices.

Sometimes juggling professional responsibilities and individual support can be tricky. Paris and Lung (2008) discuss teacher's struggles to balance between child-centered and standardized approaches to early childhood education. According to them, teachers are:

> [...] architects of the learning environment, as creators of opportunities for children to explore, examine, question, theorize, and test their emerging knowledge (DeVries & Kohlberg, 1987; DeVries & Zan, 1995; Fosnot, 1996). They actively create, critique, and adapt curricula and adopt, reject, or initiate practices in order to support their particular children. (p. 254).

This definition supports the idea about a shift from the educator as an instructor to the educator as a facilitator and mediator (Whitebread, 2012). For instance, research conducted by Jordan (2008) shows that the approach of teaching has profound effects on children's agency. The author compares scaffolding and co-constructing in terms of expertise, child- or adult-led, communication and outcomes. While scaffolding gives the impression of the

teacher as a more experienced partner, with final goals in mind who uses communication to stir the outcome (gaining a specific knowledge) by leading the conversation; co-constructing sees the child and the adult as equal in terms of having specific knowledge, engage in a dialogue (initiated by either of them) to gain more knowledge that is of interest for the child. In simple terms, the two approaches could be explained as "scaffolding learning for the child" and "co-constructing learning with the child" (Jordan, 2008, p. 40).

This different role of the educators as either a leader or a partner has been observed by others. For Tobin (1997) and Habermas (1995), a subject-object relationship often exists in education. To avoid that, teachers need to be able to have control of the classroom, while also "embrace, validate, and empower the body and the child" (Tobin, 1997, p. 71). A subject-subject relationship enables "openness, reciprocity and mutual understanding" (Habermas, 1995, p. 158). It is still up to the educator to encourage responsibility and self-control in the children, as well as install appropriate behaviour, however this responsibility needs to come from the teacher's understanding of themselves as a professional, rather than from external validation, such as colleagues' opinion or educational goals.

This section focuses on the supportive role educators play in children building on individual skills and knowledge. For the educators this offers an opportunity to learn about the world through the perspective of the contemporary child. As a result, ”intergenerational relationships” become more pronounced (Pufall et al., 2003, p. 52). The next section focuses further on this aspect.

3.3 Relational Agency in the Educational Aspect

So far the discussion in this chapter has revolved around children's agency as the cognition and maturity of the individual and their participation in the social context. It becomes obvious that the others and the environment are constantly present elements. Furthermore, the relationship between the children and the educators, the dialogue between the two parties, seems to become central to the

children's agency. Kinnunen (2015) and Etheredge (2003) focus particularly on the children's voices and the significance of educators' listening to these voices. Pakarinen (2012) comments on the importance of daily interactions between children and teachers for establishing a classroom climate, where children and their needs and interests are taken seriously. Whether referred to as intergenerational co-agency (Kinnunen, 2015), community of inquiry and discourse (Etheredge, 2003) or classroom climate (Pakarinen, 2012), the interaction between children and teachers has a shared interest and aims at co-constructing the social context together.

Even if children's agency is to be studied as only concerning children, it is still interpreted and deciphered from an adult perspective, particularly from the adult as a former child or as different to childhood in the present. Mannion (2007) argues that childhood and adulthood cannot exist separate from each other but that they inhabit the same space. Therefore, conceptualizing agency as only belonging to the children has its flaws and a more relational approach, around dialog and negotiation, seems more appropriate. Engaging in relational agency puts pressure on adults to reconsider and re-evaluate their motivations for working along children and be mindful of their power, attitude and own agency. In simple words, Mannion (2007) presents arguments for examining children's agency as inseparable from the adults.

Interacting with others leads to reflecting on oneself from others and. Burkitt (2015) proposes that "people [produce] particular effects in the world and on each other through their relational connections and joint actions" (p. 323). This interdependency is an inseparable part of relational agency but the social actors should be cautious of disbalance of power among individuals. Pugh (2014) takes the significance of relationality even further (citing Lee, 2001), by ascribing positive powers to dependency as a skill to promote further their interests.

While the research above looks at relational agency as a phenomenon in itself, Edwards and D'Arcy (2004) and Edwards (2005) examine it from the perspective of the adult, specifically the teacher. Edwards and D'Arcy (2004) compare relational agency with Vygotsky's ZPD and offer the following

definition:

> Relational agency is not simply a matter of collaborative action on an object. Rather it is a capacity to recognize and use the support of others in order to transform the object. It is an ability to seek out and use others as resources for action and equally to be able to respond to the need for support from others. (p. 149-150)

Relational agency allows individuals to share knowledge and ideas and, consequently, use them for their own purposes, turning individual into shared. Relational agency requires both children and adults to develop skills for operating in an "open ended learning zone" (Edwards and D'Arcy, 2004, p. 154) and often depends greatly on the teacher's experience and ability to sustain joint action with the children. Despite the benefits of the sharing expertise, Edwards (2005) warns against the danger of losing the individual's sense of responsibility.

The relational aspect, its 'work and learn together' characteristic, gives a new perspective on children's agency as a whole. As mentioned, relational agency could be easily associated with educational environments. Renshaw (2016) explains children's agency in such settings as both "a mediated goal-directed action and a relational practice" (p. 61) originating from the individual actions or inactions in a given situation, in accordance to rules and conventions.

This section emphasized once again the relationship between children and educators and the importance it has for the individuals. In terms of agency, this relationship uses the strengths of the individual to promote a shared goal. However, it becomes also clear that interactions take place in specific environments, defined by norms, rules, structures, beliefs. To study children's agency without taking these under consideration, would be incomplete. Therefore, the next chapter looks at some of the elements of the educational environment relevant to the subject of this study.

4 THE EDUCATIONAL ENVIRONMENT

The strengths of Finnish education lies in employing qualified personnel (Karila, 2012) and following a comprehensive national core curriculum, creating an educational organization that supports the growth and well-being of the children (Rutanen & Hännikäinen, 2020, p. 100). Its organizational, pedagogical and cultural characteristics add various layers to the concept of children's agency. Even though the focus is on Finnish ECEC, international sources have also been used to support the universal nature of the agency. The chapter begins with an explanation of organizational culture in terms of ECEC setting. From there, two more specific aspects are examined - the pedagogical and the routine. Pedagogical here stands for learning and teaching in ECEC, while routine explains the organization of daily life.

4.1 Organizational Culture of ECEC

Organizational culture can be defined as the philosophies, principles and practices of an organization embodied in values, attitudes, beliefs and norms shared by a group of people (Radford, 2015; Teasley, 2017; Kapur, 2018). The organizational culture is affected by both institutional and personal interactions between the members of the group, where both hierarchical and collaborative relationships occur (McFarlane, 2015). In ECEC, organizational culture can be summarized as the way things are done to create a feeling of belonging, according to shared standards, aimed at achieving a shared goal. Despite educators being seen as the leader, parents and children are recognized as equal contributors to the shared culture. In the case of children, Radford (2015) considers the influence organizational norms have on their understanding and assimilating of how things are done in an ECEC setting.

In the organizational culture of ECEC, children are recognized not only for their future capital but also valued as children here and now with their opinions being appreciated and considered. Percy-Smith (2010) suggests that

educational spaces should engage the members of the organizational culture socially through dialogue where critical thinking is encouraged, where values and rights are respected. Lipponen and colleagues (2018) found that including the children in constructing the shared culture meant enabling children to be participants rather than just recipients and to have accountability for their contribution, their ideas being acknowledged and respected.

The ECEC setting functions simultaneously as the organizational environment set by authorities and as a shared culture constructed by the actors participating in it (Markström and Halldén, 2009). On one hand, it is a place where children are given freedom but, on the other, it is a place where children are controlled. Markström and Halldén (2009) further pose the question "to what extent children have agency and the opportunity to defend a social and personal autonomy in their everyday life in preschool" (p. 10). Kehily (2008) argues that children have "valuable knowledge to share and … a right to influence decisions about what happened to them within an early childhood curriculum" (p. 165). In response, Corsaro (2009) observes that children create their own "set of activities or routines, artefacts, values and concerns" (p. 301) which aids in bending the rules established by adults. Therefore, it could be argued that even though children's opportunities might be limited, they still find ways to challenge the principles of the organizational culture.

The organizational culture in ECEC is defined by the individuals who inhabit it. However, Vuorisalo and colleagues (2015) point out that it also involves "the physical environment and concrete objects, personal interpretations of physical and cultural space, and cultural and collective views about the space" (p. 67). Children and educators create, with their actions, the culture of the organization they are part of, however, the organizational context has already been defined historically, culturally and physically by legislation or policy. The next section looks more closely at learning and teaching and its connection to children's agency.

4.2 The Pedagogical Aspect

In accordance with European directives, the Finnish National core curriculum (2019) describes ECEC as a foundation stage of life-long learning. Central point in it is the personnel's understanding of developmental and pedagogical principles but also understanding the individual value of each child. ECEC is seen as "a community where children and personnel learn together and from each other" (National core curriculum, 2019, p. 44). This community develops and evolves constantly through enabling the individuals in it to try new ideas, be persistent in their efforts and comfortable with making mistakes. It is rooted in the cooperation between the two main participants (educators and children) and the shared knowledge that both bring to the relationship - characteristics similar to relational agency.

Internationally, Lipman (2014) and Percy-Smith (2010) consider as central for ECEC children thinking by themselves, experiencing and gaining confidence with their own opinions and feeling comfortable and proud of their own abilities. Thinking skills (both creative and critical), are developed in cooperation with others and acquired not only through educator-organized activities but also routines such as meal, rest and dress up time (Lipponen et al., 2018). Additionally, Whitebread (2012) describes a quality ECEC environment for young children as one where they are "properly challenged … recognized and built upon … learning not only practical, cognitive and social skills, but also how to make choices, develop their own ideas, and manage and regulate their own learning" (p. 4).

The idea of the child as an "active, social constructor of knowledge" (p. 89) is also represented in Etheredge's observations (2003) of reinventing the pedagogical setting - the roles of the teacher, child and environment, the meaning of instruction and curriculum. This new educational setting represents distancing from the pattern of the teacher supplying knowledge for children to collect and consciously moving towards providing opportunities to be spontaneous, to engage in inquiry and discourse, to work together (Etheredge, 2003) and create a shared experience. The ECEC setting becomes a "place for

children to explore important personal, social, cognitive, and cultural connections and … a place of social and intellectual relationship." (Etheredge, 2003, p. 91).

Constructing knowledge in cooperation with adults requires motivating the children, to get engaged and involved in the process of learning, to be active participants rather than passive recipients. Tobin (1997) suggests that through interaction with significant others (in case of early education - caregivers) children learn about themselves and their boundaries (both in terms of physical limitations and social involvement). Similarly, Woodhead states the importance of "close relationships" (1999, p. 12). This is also supported by others - for Percy-Smith (2010), this relationship helps close the gap between the two groups; for Jordan (2008), both child and educator "[work] together towards the upper ends of their zones of proximal development (ZPDs)" (p. 32).

Despite its beneficial effect on children and learning, the ECEC setting has its limitations. Hart (2008) argues that segregation of childhood in modern society happens through educational and recreational institutions. Put in educational institutions, children no longer learn through casual interactions with adults but from adults in a formal and strictly defined manner. Institutional education also leaves children with no opportunity to initiate, plan and manage their own lives, putting the extent of their agency under question. Hart (2008) also underlines that including children should not be forced but should happen organically, so that children are informed of their options and let to decide for themselves. The focal point is learning to cooperate with others, to "recognise the rights of others to have a voice and involve them" (Hart, 2008, p. 24).

As becomes evident from the above, pedagogical settings represent the space where teaching and learning happens. Here learning should not be understood as the formal acquisition of factual knowledge but as learning to be self and to be with others. Therefore, children's agency should not be limited simply to actively contributing to planning, implementing and evaluating teacher-lead activities with cognitive content. As mentioned previously, learning happens everywhere. Therefore, the next section looks further into

routines as a space to learn and exercise agency.

4.3 The Routine Aspect

Routine activities occupy a good amount of the time children spend in ECEC settings. For example, one of the kindergartens who participated in this study estimated that eating took about four hours every day. In addition to their practical necessity, routines also have hidden learning aspects.

According to Morrison (2015, p. 324), daily routines and schedules incorporate organizational philosophy, family needs and local standards. A study by Wildenger, McIntyre, Fiese, and Eckert (2008) on routines in family life shows them to be influential for the child's social and cognitive development. Routines bring stability and predictability to daily life which in turns decreases stress levels in the child, promotes trustworthiness in the setting and encourages independence.

Routines, such as dressing, eating and resting, happen at home but also in kindergarten, therefore children are familiar with them but in different contexts. Lansdown (2009) draws an interesting comparison between family and educational setting. In the first, childhood is associated with listening to adults, free of responsibility, protected; while in the later, children are also encouraged to show their unique competence, influence on the organizational culture, involvement. This leads to the idea that even though similar, daily routines also carry a different meaning depending on the setting.

Despite the place where routines happen, they benefit children in various ways. Waller et al (2011) focus on the positivity of having a daily structure and schedule. According to them, structure helps children make sense of the adult-constructed reality. They propose that routines, due to their "predictability, safekeeping and shared understanding" (2011, p. 108), create a sense of belonging for both children and adults. Degotardi (2010) acknowledges that when adults become too cautious and controlling, children's ownership is in danger. Therefore, to preserve children's participation in the shared culture as an equal member, educators need to recognize and acknowledge children's

contribution. As Markström and Halldén (2009) propose, there should be a constant negotiation between the routines and rules and the opportunity for self-expression.

Particularly with younger children, routines occupy a majority of time making them educational rather than just care experiences. Alcock (2007) suggests that routines are opportunities for children to "collectively create meaning" (p. 283) in activities characterized by social rules and physical restrictions. By doing this, children internalize in a playful manner culturally prescribed practices. Additionally, through their behaviour, children transform "potentially mundane routines" into "enjoyable social activities" (Alcock, 2007, p. 292) where children can challenge adults. Williams and Williams (2001) propose that children operate inside a framework designed by adults but on their own terms.

So far, the suggestion is that daily routines should make children feel safe and give them a sense of awareness. It should help them form an image of themselves and their place in the social structure. However, Tobin (1997) presents an alternative view on routine. The child begins to experience a sense of ownership and self first through his or her body and in shared routine activities with caregivers. He argues that, for the sake of efficiency and the smooth running of the day, teachers create "regimes" for children's physical needs (eating, dressing, going to the toilet, etc.) or, in his words, "when as well as how children walk, sit, sleep, and so on is all important to their caregivers" (Tobin, 1997, p. 44). The ideas that children need to be guided, disciplined and controlled before they could begin actual learning, gives the setting an institutional feeling and shows adults as ignorant of children's ways. Even though children do not necessarily understand this regimental culture, they follow and enforce it to other children because breaking the established rules would lead to dissatisfaction in both children and teachers. Tobin (1997) goes further and states that enforcing rules and regulations for the sake of safety takes away the joy of ECEC. It turns the setting into a place where the educator has the power and the child has to be an obedient follower.

For Hewitt (2011) and Tobin (1997) group care is where young children

learn to adapt to social norms and expectations. According to them, children use their bodies and behaviours to communicate and engage with the environment and make sense of it. Tobin refers to 'civilizing' children into group care by teaching them "to monitor, control and restrain" (1997, p. 43) their bodies and behaviours. The role of the caregivers here seems to be to reinforce the established constraints, rules, norms, conventions and standards through regime and discipline. This brings the question of the importance of routines and whom they benefit the most. Hewitt (2011) suggests that schedules should be designed according to the child's needs, creating a safe and predictable setting for the children, while Tobin (1997) argues that schedules serve to make the life in the group care more orderly and systematic, benefiting the adults. This further questions the balance between care and freedom in ECEC.

The routine aspect of the organizational culture provides a look at the space where children and educators interact. As it becomes evident from the text above, routines could be a good thing that supports independence, which benefits agency. They could, however, be a bad thing in the sense of restricting freedom and, therefore, impeding agency. As with the pedagogical aspect, even though the organizational expectations are historically and culturally set, the practical and particular implementations are subjected to the participants interpretations.

5 AIM AND RESEARCH QUESTIONS

The purpose of this research is to study educators' perspectives on children's agency in routine activities. The study took place in foreign language ECEC settings in Finland.

Historically, ECEC had the objective of facilitating parents' return to work. Recent shifts, however, have added to it providing support for children's development and learning provided by qualified personnel (Karila, 2012; Colwell et al., 2015; Murray, 2017) by involving the child in the process. Even though agency is strongly encouraged in policy, research shows, it is often ambiguous in practice. Studies of children's agency mostly focus on children's participation in designing, implementing and evaluating their contribution to teacher-lead activity as prescribed in the National core curriculum (2019) and often ignore routine activities. While educators are conscious of involving the child in organized learning, the question is how aware they are of involving them in routines where different, but equally significant, learning takes place.

Routines are historically designed but also implemented subjectively by educators in practice, meaning that the child (skill level, mood, previous experience), the educator (personal understanding, work experience) or the concrete situation (weather, adult-child ratio) could affect their implementation. Routine activities are also some of the busiest times during the day rarely allowing for immediate reflection on behalf of the educators. By routine activities here are meant specifically dress up, meal and rest times. Free play and outside time were considered as part of the routine structure but consequently were not studied. While some participants brought up interesting examples in these two activities, they often incorporated content similar to that of teacher-led activities. Therefore, they were left out of the analysis. Planned activities, designed by educators with a specific academic content in mind, were entirely excluded. Such activities have been the focus of previous research, while routine events and agency have been less studied despite routines occupying a good portion of time and being opportunities for learning.

The perspectives of the educators in how they define children's agency was central for this study. According to the National core curriculum (2019, p. 19), acquiring knowledge and skills, leads to participation and agency. Consequently, references are made to 'growth, development and learning' as part of lifelong learning (p. 25) and it is the responsibility of ECEC professionals to provide opportunities and support for this. Therefore, educators' understanding of children's agency could have a strong influence on the way they plan and organize the ECEC environment.

Also different from previous research is the foreign language aspect. The National core curriculum (2019) also provides guidelines for foreign language speakers, bilingual or special methodology ECEC but only vaguely addresses foreign language kindergartens. With small exceptions, ECEC services (in other than Finnish or Swedish languages) in the Capital Area of Finland are offered by private providers. Ruutiainen, Alasuutari and Karila (2020) found that the private sector covered 17% of all ECEC in 2017 and offered more diverse services (such as foreign language learning). Nevertheless, private providers "are obliged to comply with the national ECEC curriculum and national statutes regarding staff qualifications and child–adult ratios." (p. 35). Despite some studies done in bilingual preschool groups, most previous research regarding children's agency takes place in Finnish ECEC centres.

The research questions of the study are:

1. How do educators describe children's agency in routine activities?

2. What hinders and supports children's agency in foreign language ECEC settings?

6 IMPLEMENTATION OF THE STUDY

This chapter describes the methodological framework of the study. First, I discuss the reasons behind choosing a qualitative approach as suitable for this study. Next, participants, data collection and analysis are presented. Last, I look at the ethical consideration regarding the study.

6.1 Qualitative Research

The purpose of this research was to study early childhood educators' perspectives on children's agency. A qualitative research method was used to get "an in-depth understanding" (Mukherji & Albon, 2018, p. 37) of the phenomenon. Previously, the topic of agency has been studied in teacher-led activities or bilingual learning environments. Therefore, I chose to focus on foreign language setting and routine activities as less explored aspects. As it is a small scale research, the purpose here is not to prove or disprove existing theory or to generalize results but to give an alternative view.

Tracy (2012) describes qualitative research as "immersing oneself", "trying to make sense" and "build[ing] larger knowledge" (p. 3). Furthermore, the influence of the researcher and the context of the specific situation are characteristic for qualitative research. Conducting this type of research involves obtaining, processing and reporting data in a systematic way in order for new information to emerge. Qualitative research offers depth into the study phenomenon and the possibility for the researcher to focus on the issues that are important for that particular study. It is insightful also in the sense that it allows for the researcher to provide analysis, instead of simply reporting what participants have said.

Qualitative research methods encompass diverse data collection and analysis approaches. Participants selection, for instance, can be based on various requirements. The following sections examine the sample, data gathering and data analysis employed in this research.

6.2 Participants

Initially, over 10 English language kindergartens in the Capital area of Finland were contacted with an invitation to take part in the research. Most places did not respond or declined to take part due to lack of time or resources. Three kindergartens agreed to participate, however one withdrew in the beginning of the data collection stage.

At first, the plan was that only personnel with the title 'teacher', with degrees in early childhood pedagogy from universities or universities of applied sciences, would be asked to participate in the research. However, due to the low number of initial responses, the criteria were changed to anyone working in a pedagogical capacity with the children. Ultimately, the sample included managers, teachers (both from university and university of applied sciences), nurses, assistants and substitutes from two English speaking kindergartens. For convenience, from now onward, the participants will be referred to as educators. The title or education of the participants was not considered significant, therefore not collected. All participants had some level of understanding of the Finnish ECEC system and both kindergartens followed the Finnish curriculum. Even though previous work experience or level of education was not explicitly collected, during the interviews, it became obvious that educational background and amount of work experience varied greatly among participants.

Important to mention is that I was familiar with one of the kindergartens and their approach to work. However, I was not familiar with most of the employees (participants in the research). The other kindergarten and personnel were completely unknown to me.

6.3 Data Collection

The initial choice of data collection approach was diary entries kept by the participants. However, after initial testing, that proved to be too time

consuming and provided less rich and spontaneous information. Therefore, the approach was changed to small group interviews.

To allow for discussion-like setting where "topics emerge naturally" (Mukherji & Albon, 2018, p. 321) based on themes provided by the researcher, a predominantly unstructured interview was selected as a data gathering approach. The sharing of control between participants and researcher and the broad approach to the topic supported "understanding" rather than "explaining" (Mukherji & Albon, 2018, p. 322). In this sense, the collected data has richness but lacks generalizability.

The total number of participants was 19 from nine group interviews. The preliminary plan was to obtain interviews from 10 groups, however one group cancelled due to lack of time in the middle of the data gathering stage, therefore only 9 group interviews were conducted. Each group in both kindergartens was interviewed separately. Some groups were only for one age group, some were mixed. At the time of the data gathering, the participants worked with children from two to seven years of age but some had previous experience with various age groups. In some instances, children were present and in some they were not.

All interviews were conducted in English and took place in the ECEC settings during rest time during a three-month period. The interviews took place towards the middle of the school year which meant that participants had some familiarity with each other, the place and the children. The middle of the year was also a relevantly peaceful time in kindergarten life, compared to the busy beginning of the school year or tiredness towards the end.

Organizing the interviews in small groups, according to the working teams of one to four people, was necessary for practical reasons but also provided a familiar and comfortable atmosphere for speaking freely. The participants were encouraged to discuss among themselves the topic and I intervened with further questions for clarifications or to stir the conversation back on track.

Each interview began with a short explanation about the research. The following excerpt from the National core curriculum (2019) was used as a starting point for the discussion :

> Each child has the right to be heard, seen, noticed and understood as himself or herself and as a member of his or her community. (2019, p. 27)

Routine activities (dress up, meal, rest and free play times) in practice were used as context. However no examples were given to avoid influencing the responses. In addition, the participants were offered a few guiding instructions - describe a situation, reflect on way of communication (verbal and nonverbal), desired outcomes and actual results.

Often, participants talked about the same situation or child and complemented each other's answers. Also comments from one participant would prompt a new line of discussion for the other participants adding diversity to the discussion. Participants did not criticize or disrespect each other's contribution to the conversation. On the contrary, at times, the discussion served as an outlet for deeper individual and team reflection. The interviews took between 30 minutes and an hour.

6.4 Data Analysis

Thematic data analysis was chosen for this study due to its versatility as a qualitative approach. According to Braun and Clarke, thematic analysis serves for "identifying, analyzing and reporting patterns (themes) within data" (2006, p. 79). This approach to data analysis has flexibility that allows for "a rich and detailed, yet complex, account" (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 78). Characteristic for thematic analysis is that it combines the freedom of the researcher with the structure of the framework without imposing limitations. It also recognizes the active role of the researcher in the research process. For this type of analysis, instead of simply documenting themes that present themselves in the data, the researcher actively chooses patterns of interest.

Thematic analysis allows for a range of interpretation of the data from simple systematized description to more multidimensional review. Thematic analysis can provide a reflective perspective on the reality of the participants or examine this reality through theory. It could also provide a middle ground between experience and theory.

In my research, I focused on the content from the perspective of the participants, while considering it in connection to literature on ECEC education and children's agency. I followed the six phases by Braun and Clarke (2006) for data analysis. Table 1 shows the original phases and examples from my own data.

TABLE 1 Phases of data analysis

Phase	Examples from this research
Familiarizing with the data	Common topics across all the interviews evolved around working with children, their behaviour; educators' reflections of own work; having rules and structure;
Generating initial codes	'working towards the kid, not against', 'you need to use your words if you want something', 'if you listen to me, I'll listen to you' 'asking and giving the right to choose' 'not downgrade them', 'they are really proud of themselves', 'hearing why the child doesn't want to do something', 'how can we find a way which works for everyone', 'safety means following some rules'; 'sharing responsibility in solutions', 'balancing educators' authority and children's autonomy';
Searching for themes	External influences; Educators' perception of themselves; Views on children; Educators-children interactions; Structures and rules;
Reviewing themes	Collaboration between children and educators (equality, dialogue, involvement); Growing as an individual (learning and teaching; independence and trust); Organizational culture (culture and family; rules and structure)
Defining and naming themes	Disruption, refusal and avoidance; Involvement, trust and independence; Physical settings; Organizational structure; Pedagogical framework; Social influence;
Producing the report	Children's agency as defined by educators: strive for change, negotiating changes, sharing of responsibility; Organizational culture as hindering and supporting: institutional practices; pedagogical beliefs

The first phase consisted of familiarization with the data through listening, transcribing and reading. The interviews were audio recorded and transcribed shortly after they took place. In the transcription, irrelevant information (for

example addressing children during the interview or side discussions regarding particular events in the group) was omitted. The transcript was done mostly free of speech dysfluency (repetitions, uh, hmm, etc.), with no marked pauses. Overlapping talk was marked as 'Unclear'. The transcription took 103 pages in Times New Roman Font (12) with 1,5 line spacing. During the interviews, I started writing down field notes about topics that stood out or could have led to further discussion. When first listening and reading all the interviews, I noticed some generally recurring ideas, also present in the field notes, that revolved around educators describing reasons for children's behaviour, pondering their own actions, referring to safety and the importance of having routines.

Phase two included generating initial codes which consisted of recognizing often discussed topics in the whole data set and relevant to the research questions. For example, participants talked about 'working towards the kid, not against', 'you need to use your words if you want something', 'if you listen to me, I'll listen to you' 'asking and giving the right to choose' 'not downgrade them', 'they are really proud of themselves', 'hearing why the child doesn't want to do something', 'how can we find a way which works for everyone', 'safety means following some rules'. In other instances, educators' responses had a more abstract representation. They recognized that they had certain responsibility for the safety, well-being and development of the child but also acknowledged the child's independence as an individual. They discussed children's agency as a process of working together towards a satisfactory solution for both sides while accepting responsibility for one's own decisions. Often participants talked about the same topic but had different perspectives. For instance, parents were mentioned as 'educational partners' but for some educators, this partnership involved educating parents, while for others - accepting parents as the highest authority on the child. Important step at this stage was to remove data, even if interesting, that did not correspond to the research questions or the criteria of the research, such as examples of teacher-led activities. However, it should be acknowledged that, as I have been exposed to all the data during the collection and the first phase of the analysis, that unrelated to the topic data had very likely nuanced my perception of the

themes. In addition, the topics the educators discussed often covered different contexts. At times educators started talking about a routine but their talk gradually slipped into teacher-led activity or talked about interacting with the children without specifically specifying whether it was a routine or other activity.

In phase three the forming of the preliminary themes began. Here the codes were grouped together according to similarities and named in connection to the literature background (Waller et al., 2011; Mannion, 2007; Radford, 2015) of the study. I observed that educators talked about agency in terms of what the child did, their growth and development. It involved both the present and the future. When describing situations, they often referred to what they (the educators) through or did or even felt. They talked about children's agency as interactions between them and the children. The conversation also included responsibilities to provide care and safety and to empower children. The need for respect of the children as individuals was constantly present. Often children's wishes and educators' responsibilities created disagreements, which required active communication and negotiation to reach solutions. In addition, educators discussed factors, such as safety, pedagogical goals and outside influences, as affecting the child-educator relationship that was beyond either control.

Phase four, as described by Braun and Clarke (2006) was about reviewing the themes and their relevance to the codes. I struggled with systematizing the themes in a way that covered relevant information but also engaged in a dialogue with each other. This led to often reviewing the raw data and looking at the initial codes. It appeared that the themes lacked depth or contained unclear connections between ideas. I noticed that some codes belonged to more than one theme, for example codes about the child-educator relationship and about communication referred to similar or same content. As a result, the two themes regarding the interactions between children and the educators merged in one - 'Collaboration between children and educators' including subthemes, such as equality, dialogue, involvement. In addition, I merged 'The educator as the experienced partner' and 'The child as a

developing being' forming new themes - 'Growing as an individual' that contained sub themes such as learning and teaching, independence and trust. I renamed the last previous theme ('Group care') to 'Organizational culture' with sub themes culture and family and rules and structure.

In phase five, the defining and naming of the themes took place and the number of quotes was narrowed down. I started with specifying the main themes that emerged during phase four. As suggested by Braun and Clarke (2006), here the themes went defining and refining, which led to another renaming and restructuring. I noticed that in their state from phase four, the themes did not give direct answers to the research questions. Therefore, I turned again to the research questions and how the present themes answered them. As a consequence, for the first research question, regarding definition of agency, new themes such as 'Avoidance', 'Imitation', 'Disruption', etc. were constructed. Through them, I discussed examples of topics such as interactions between children and educators, learning from experience, being independent and building trust. The second research question about Organizational culture centered around the physical environment with its opportunities and limitations, institution with its rules and structures and the pedagogical background with its focus on agency.

The final sixth phase of the analysis involved producing a report. Figure 1 shows the final themes and subthemes.

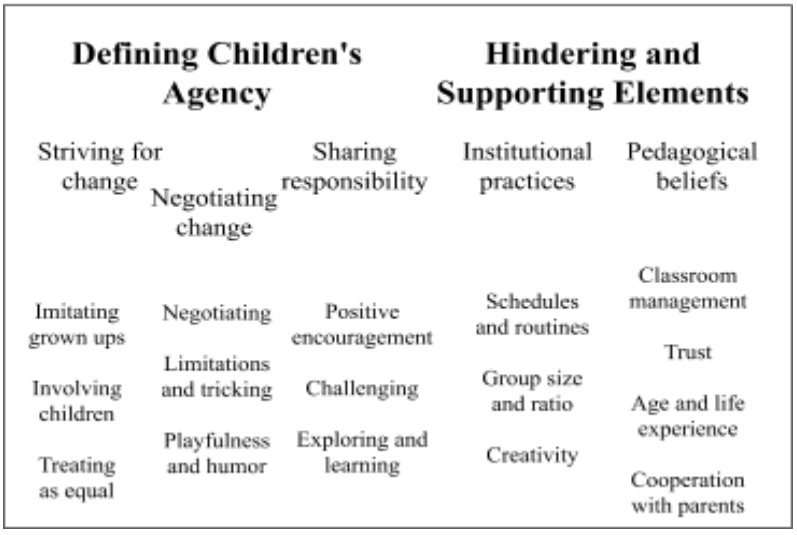

Figure 1: Themes and subthemes

During this phase, a final organizing and rewriting of the themes and their content took place to create a more comprehensive and thorough picture. Based on the definition of agency suggested by Waller et al. (2011), the final themes for the first research question about describing children's agency became (1) Striving for change, (2) Negotiating changes and (3) Sharing responsibility. The main themes related to the second research question about supporting and hindering children's agency followed theoretical definitions of organizational culture. The themes became (1) Institutional practices and (2) Pedagogical beliefs.

6.5 Ethical Considerations

The kindergartens were initially contacted in written form with a request to participate in a research concerning children's agency. After the preliminary agreement to take part, the managers were contacted either via email or telephone and meeting times were arranged. One of the kindergartens was visited beforehand to discuss the research. The managers in each kindergarten were provided with a privacy notice, as well as an information note for the parents explaining that a research was taking place in the kindergarten. On the day of each interview, the individual participants were given the same information and were asked to sign a consent form. No further permissions from municipal organizations were necessary as both kindergartens are privately owned.

Generally, no reluctance to participate was noticed in the participants and, even though time was often an issue, they seemed genuinely interested and happy to talk. Often the beginnings were slow and tentative but gradually the participants opened the topics and engaged in discussions. Only one interview gave the impression of disinterest and the participants seemed distracted by the children. In this same team, one of the participants avoided joining the interview at first which was not addressed by me, allowing the person to not participate if they wished so or to join on their terms. It is not

completely clear whether the initial reaction was as a consequence of not knowing or not wanting to participate or some other reason.

As the participants had worked with each other for a few months, they all seemed to have a certain level of shared understanding. They were respectful in waiting for their turns, not interrupting or taking over the discussion and often asking each other about the other's opinions. They did finish each other's thoughts sometimes. Mild disagreements emerged but were handled as grounds for discussion and not as power struggle. No arguments, pressure or dismissal of one another's opinions were observed. I tried to encourage everyone to speak mostly through eye contact and asking for more information or clarification. Most groups had one person being more talkative than the others but it was not to the point of monopolizing the conversation and often served as encouraging others to speak. There was a general feeling of curiosity towards the interview questions and tentativeness in responding but also a view about the research as good for reflection on practices. Biggest challenge for the participants was often disconnecting agency from teacher-led activities as described in the Finnish ECEC curriculum.

Participants were informed that the information collected will not be shared with the management as part of evaluation of individual workers but generalized anonymous feedback could be provided for the purpose of analysing organizational practices. Saunders, Kitzinger and Kitzinger (2015) discuss the challenges of balancing between anonymity and data integrity. Using a group type of interview was another way for me to avoid personal characteristics of the participants. During the data collection stage, participants were given the possibility to withdraw or retract statements, if they felt uncomfortable. According to Bolderston (2012), it is important to build a good rapport and trust between participants and researcher.

The anonymity of the participants was a major consideration throughout the whole research process. For that purpose, and due to the fact that participants often completed each other’s sentences, direct quotes from the raw data were marked only by the tags of the interviews (Interview 1, 2, 3). The numbers do not correspond to the order in which the interviews were taken.

During the transcribing however, individual responses were marked with E1, E2, E3 or E4 (standing for educator 1, educator 2, etc.). For safety purposes, the audio files and transcripts of the interviews were kept in a password-protected folder, in accordance with the data protection requirements of the University of Jyväskylä. All files will be deleted after the thesis is published. No information will be distributed to other parties.

The interviews focus on generic examples that happened with most children. In a few cases, discussions centered on a particular child and revealing information was shared. In such cases, the general meaning was analysed but sensitive information was omitted from the final report.

7 RESULTS

Educators often described children's agency as a process that involved them and the children. Similarly, Edwards and D'Arcy (2004) discuss agency as a transformational collaboration between educators and children. Characteristic of this process was that it initiated from the children as a strive for change from one state to another. However, the participants acknowledged that children and educators worked together and contributed towards results through negotiation. Ultimately, the change supported children's learning and independence.

As children and educators share the same environment, the process was affected by the values, beliefs and norms a pedagogical setting is structured around. For the participants some of these hindered and some supported children's agency.

Before continuing further, it is important to mention that the concept of children's agency was discussed by participants based on the National core curriculum for ECEC (2019) as it was central for both kindergartens. However, it should be considered that individual interpretations by the educators, based on their cultural and professional background, affected their perspective on the topic. Such influences, however, were not made very explicit throughout the interviews in general, therefore they are not specifically accounted for. In addition, often personnel and families spoke different languages and as part of this study, the language aspect was considered. However, the results showed similarities to previous research where the main participants spoke the same language, which suggested that language differences had little or no influence on educators' views regarding children's agency.

7.1 Children's Agency as Defined by Educators

Participants described children's agency as children striving for change, educators and children negotiating a change and sharing the responsibility that

goes with it. The following sections look at each topic through practical examples in routines.

7.1.1 Striving for Change

Commonly shared opinion was that children used their behaviour and body language to demonstrate their desires or wishes for a change. Some participants suggested that children acted out, instead of verbally expressing their thoughts. For example, in one interview it was explained how a child intentionally engaged in disruptive activities, such as making noises, to express their wish not to sleep any more during rest time. For the educators, the child was 'speaking' through actions instead of words because the child did not believe they will be acknowledged otherwise:

> We had a case of one child that wasn't ready any more to go to the sleeping room and we observed that during some period. We asked for some advice from the parents. What the parent thought. Then we decided that maybe it's better that the child doesn't go to the sleeping room since it didn't want to sleep any more … basically it was a child who dictated in a way with the behaviour. (Interview 9)

Other groups discussed how children had temper tantrums when they did not want to eat something or cried when they did not want to undress by themselves after outside time. Even though educators recognized the non-verbal ways in which children communicate, as it becomes clear from the following example, verbal expression was encouraged:

> I'm just thinking about the one particular child who likes to throw himself on the floor when he doesn't get his way. And that's been a long process for us and trying to get him to not do that. Like telling him that 'No, you need to stand up and talk. You can't just throw yourself on the ground and cry because we don't know what you want.' And then when he is able to stand up and talk then we can negotiate with him about whatever it is that's made him upset so he didn't want to eat something on his plate ok, well, now that you've told us that let's have a look of what's on your plate and you can eat these things that you like and leave the rest on your plate but there's no point to cry about it because we cannot understand cry. (Interview 8)

Another way educators thought children showed their interest for change was children's willingness to engage with tasks usually performed by adults. Educators observed that children would openly ask to help and get excited when given "grown up things" to do. For example, it was common for children to show interest in helping set up the tables for lunch. The focus of this task shifted with age - with younger children, it involved putting the necessary utensils safely on the table, while in preschool, it had transformed into figuring out an efficient system for table setting. Despite being a simple routine of preparing for lunch, educators saw this also as an opportunity for the children to get a sense of responsibility. Even though educators acknowledged that simple tasks were not something adults would get easily excited about, they also understood that children had a different outlook - what seemed small for an adult could be enormous for a child. Educators mentioned that it was important for them to treat children as they would treat other adults - for example, not monitoring children while eating but sitting down and having lunch with them or talking to them the way educators want to be talked to. Educators believed that children were able to comprehend even complex subjects when they were addressed in a respectful but child-appropriate manner. In other words, they found it imperative to talk to children in a way that they would understand without undermining or belittling them.

In line with children imitating adult behaviour, participants noticed children also enjoyed helping each other. For instance, one educator found dress up time stressful with children being impatient waiting to be helped with their gloves. The educator suggested to the children to help each other making it a playful and fun experience of doing a grown up's job. It engaged the children productively by giving them something to do and diminished the stress for the educator. One participant referred to it as taking the pressure of the educator, acknowledging that adults also make mistakes and involving the children in solutions benefits everyone.

Involving children as helpers also emerged in other cases. For example, in one of groups, the educators encountered difficulties teaching a child (A)

about personal space and boundaries at the lunch table. They also observed that another child (B) was getting frustrated with the situation. Appealing to child B's leadership nature, the educators encouraged her to express her feelings to child A and to set an example. Educators noticed that child A listened to child B more than to them. In addition, child B was able to understand child A better. It was a win-win situation for all.

In the previous example, the two children were the same age but in another one, a group of older children helped a group of younger ones. The educators had asked the children what they would like to have for lunch, which had prompted a discussion about appropriate food:

> It was hard for the younger ones to understand the concept of what is that and we tried to be like 'Ok, what do you eat at home for dinner?'. 'Ice-cream, chocolate'. Then the older ones started to bring it up like 'I want noodles, spaghetti'. And then the little ones started to understand what we're talking about. (Interview 8)

Children's interest in grown up tasks made the participants reflect on their influence on the children. They recognized that children were observant of educator's behaviour or predisposition. For instance, children copied educators when telling their friends to eat their food. Participants thought presenting their true self, rather than donning a 'teacher's mask', created a more natural and honest relationship. Being seen as a model prompted educators to reflect on their work approach and to recollect on their own experiences as children:

> Well, at least for me, it has been a long process with them because again in the beginning it's like they didn't even know how to express their opinions about something, to think of something different and so in the beginning it's a lot of going through us giving examples … I always try to give examples from my own experience as a child, from when I was a kid - I would do it like this or that. Or even now, when I have to give an example on how to express my opinion about something, I go through my experience - what I feel, how I feel. And of course I try to make it in a very easy way so that they understand. (interview 6)

From these examples, it becomes clear that educators observed children seeking change through actions. Similar results were observed by Clarke, Howley, Resnick and Rose (2016) children consciously seek changes according to their

wishes, desires and needs. These changes often appear as wanting to be adult-like and having power. Similarly, Leinonen (2010) discovered young children's strive for equality with adults. To be able to support this strive for change, educators considered it important to be mindful of their own behaviour, as well as put themselves in children's shoes. Kinnunen (2015) discussed the interaction between the child and the adult as "intergenerational co-agency" where participants attempt "to construct the views with the other instead of about the other" (p. 67). The next section looks further into the interaction between children and educators.

7.1.2 Negotiating Changes

Participants acknowledged children's strive for change but also expressed caution towards assigning meanings to them. Educators thought that the reason why children behaved in a certain way was not always obvious. The participants discussed their part as a support or a resource, hinting at the relational nature of children's agency. Participants shared that engaging children in interactions required a conscious effort. Interactions were described as 'negotiation', 'discussion' or 'dialogue'. Despite the different labels, these consisted of:

- Listening to the children - first, educators approached situations by addressing the emotional reaction of the children. They offered understanding and acceptance, as well as physical comfort (especially with younger children) to help them calm down. Children were given time and space to feel comfortable;

- Asking open-ended questions - consequently, educators engaged with the children in a conversation trying to find the reason why children felt a certain way;

- Explaining consequences - next, possible outcomes and the consequences of them were discussed. Children's wishes but also safety and well-being were considered;

- Deciding on solutions together - finally, an outcome was reached that was satisfactory to both parties. Regarding this outcome, educators admitted that often they stirred it in a certain direction with pedagogical or safety reasons in mind.

Educators thought that there were limitations (for example safety) to negotiating. However, saying 'no' straight away was counterproductive. Often educators appeared conflicted when discussing supporting agency and ensuring well-being. It appeared that, for them, explaining the danger or their motives made the difference between being supportive and being authoritative. By giving their point of view, educators contributed their knowledge, regarding consequences, to the shared solution. In one example, young children were "curious to see what's going on" during rest time, so they would stand up in bed risking falling down and getting hurt. The educators had a strict 'no'-policy, but instead of simply forbidding, they explained to the children the consequences:

> If they sleep on top for example, if they stand up, they can easily fall down. So it's also explaining to them … and in certain situations where we just simply …
>
> … like straight 'No' for us. And that's when they understand it's also safety related issues and we explain that - 'You can fall down, you can bump your head. Blood can come out. Mommy will be sad. You will go …' and then they kind of understand. I think they kind of understand. Sometimes they continue doing it but it's like this. (Interview 1)

Similarly, telling their reasons was expected of the children. When they were unhappy or dissatisfied, educators wanted children to be honest, rather than tell what they thought the educators want to hear or what children thought might work better in their favour:

> At lunch time when they don't like it, they say they don't like it instead of 'My tummy hurts' or 'I'm full' or this kind of thing. If you don't like it you say you don't like it. It's ok to say the real thing which is really happening. (Interview 5)

Even though educators thought they were honest with children when presenting their motives, when working out solutions, some employed 'tricking'. They justified it as 'if the child felt they were involved, they would be more cooperative'. However, the final goal was already decided by the educator and the child's opinion did not make a difference. For instance, a child and educator negotiated the amount of food the child had to eat. However, the educator already had decided on the amount but wanted to make the child think they had a say. So, the educator put a bigger portion than needed on the plate and, after negotiating with the child, took some food away. What was left was the amount of food the educator wanted the child to eat originally. The extra food was to demonstrate that the child had options. The educator's motivation was to balance between agency and well-being. Such examples emerged in different age groups and often educators felt conflicted about their actions.

In another similar example regarding balancing agency and well-being, a participant felt it their responsibility to ensure the child had eaten breakfast which resulted in the child getting upset. The educator thought discussing the situation later in the day showed the child that they matter and that 'not everything needs to be perfect' or the way the educator had envisioned it. In this example, the 'after talk' and the 'talk why' was helpful for explaining educator's motivations and for ensuring that the child knew that they were liked and cared for.

Educators shared that involving children in negotiation often took time and practice, as it was not something that came naturally to children. Their goal was to figure out what the problem was, why the child was acting in a certain way and what solution together - the child and the educator - could find. Educators needed to "hear why the child doesn't want to do what you are suggesting, recommending or asking them just to do" (Interview 9) and to

involve them rather than "just giving them … pushing it to them … [but being] something that they have discussed together" (Interview 8).

Overall, it was important for the educators to hear what message children were trying to convey rather than assume or guess. It was equally important for them to make clear that they wanted to work with the child and that they had the child's best interest in mind. In addition, the participants also recognized that a more imaginative way of negotiating gave better results. EIn other words, educators found children to be more responsive when interactions were done in playful, humorous manner:

> […] when we have some naughty days and then some of the kids are not listening well and we say 'Oh, maybe next time, maybe tomorrow you can bring your listening ears' and some come in the morning and say 'I bring my listening ears today!' (Interview 2)

> We really try to make it easier to remember or keep in mind with pictograms. And that also, well, helps to get them engaged in what we're doing now. With some kids it's more like play time than dressing up time. (Interview 8)

The participants emphasized the importance of open and honest interaction with the children. Such interactions required consciously including children in the dialogue. The process-like nature of children's agency was discussed by Hännikäinen and Rasku-Puttonen (2010) in their research with preschool children. The need for transparency and awareness of stirring decisions towards adult's choice were observed also by Thomayer (2017) and Laukkanen (2010). However, both in this study and in previous research (Kankimäki, 2014), it was noticed that educators made conscious efforts for equality. Engaging children in negotiations in creative but respectful ways benefited children's involvement. Similar results regarding using imagination, humour and playfulness were observed by Pynnönen (2013) in English language showers. In the next section, I look at the consequences of negotiations.

7.1.3 Sharing Responsibility

As it becomes evident from the previous two sections, children often initiated a change and, through a negotiation with the educators, they achieved a new state. As a consequence, the children and the educators shared responsibility, which participants felt was significant for children's agency. For instance, in one group, children and educators shared responsibility about dressing up for outside time. The educators made the decision regarding what clothes the children needed to wear, while children were responsible for putting them on themselves. The educator's responsibility here was to ensure the well-being of the child, while the child's responsibility was to be independent with his task.

Children often refused to do things they did not understand or want to do. For example, a child refused to put their gloves on because they thought it was warm outside (the sun was shining). In this case, the educator thought it was important to let the child explore and learn from experience, rather than force them to wear the gloves. Consequently, in this example, the child had gone outside without the gloves but the educator had taken them with her and had provided them once the child realized it was cold despite the sun shining. Such situations were seen by the participants as good learning opportunities for the children to be independent but also to learn about consequences. Even though the educator felt responsible for the child's well-being, she did not find it useful to decide for the child or to threaten with punishment. Forcing was seen as a bad experience which can cause bigger issues. As one participant put it, children cannot be forced to "eat, sleep or go to the toilet" (Interview 5). For another participant their job was to correct, not punish children, when they refused to follow recommendations or rules.

In another example, a child was reluctant to eat vegetables at lunch. The educator acknowledged her apprehension and used the opportunity as a learning experience:

> [...] they think 'Oh, what's the green thing? What's the red thing?'. So we explain, like, more about the foods and 'Oh, this is tomato and it's good

> for you and it's yummy' and then they have more, like, a sense of what it is. Otherwise they're like 'Oh, I don't know what it is.' (Interview 2)

Educators talked about children often avoiding doing something if it was too difficult for them. Therefore, it was necessary to challenge the children to step out of their comfort zone in a safe manner:

> [...] is also in the individual learning plans for some that we try to encourage them to do something more challenging. Because some kids, they really tend to do things they're really good at and then not really are keen on things that they are challenged even a little bit. (Interview 8)

Taking challenges sometimes led to situations where things did not go the child's way. Often educators had to guide children through accepting failures and dealing with the consequences. The message was that everybody makes mistakes, that making mistakes is part of life and an opportunity to think of alternative solutions and learn. It usually involved discussions but also practical examples:

> It's fine just pick it up, it's ok. These things happen. And then they're like 'Huh?! What?!' It's not very natural for them, they have this when something falls when they spill their milk or something falls, their first reaction is to get nervous and like "Aaah!" and then they look for the adult reaction. And they look to see how they should feel about what's happened and this is life, these things happen. When they first started pouring their own milk and it spilled a couple of times they had this panic that they didn't want to do it again. And I said 'It's fine! This is … No worries. This happens. I do it all the time, too'. And then they say 'What?!' and I've spilled milk in front of them. Not on purpose but on accident. (Interview 3)

Educators thought it was crucial for children to understand mistakes and difficulties are normal and to give children positive feedback for their efforts. For example, a child did not want to try and take their shoes off after outside time. Instead, they kept asking the educator to do it for her. In this case, the educator acknowledged the difficulties the girl was having, encouraged her to try, gave her tips on how to do it herself and provided help only when necessary. The educator used encouragement and celebrated accomplishing the task together with the child:

> I said 'You need to start doing it yourself. Let's see how we can do it easier' ... Then they start doing it and they're so proud of themselves and 'Look! I can do it!'. And then every time they do it they're like 'Oh, look! I took my shoes off!' so it's really like something that needs to be encouraged. (Interview 2)

It gave children a sense of pride to hear educators say 'You're doing a really good job!' or give them a high-five. Participants commented that it was important for them to continuously and explicitly tell children that they matter and that they are important. According to participants working with small children, younger children valued educators' praise more. One educator considered that with age, children became more confident and comfortable and less excited about praise in routine activities.

Sharing responsibility appeared to be something children learned together in their interactions with educators. Children were supported in tackling challenges and mistakes, accepting that mistakes happen but also taking responsibility for one's actions. It was important that children did not feel alone in this. Similarly, Leinonen (2010) noted the significance of sharing responsibility with adults for children's agency. Forcing was counterproductive, therefore avoided. Children were constantly offered positive encouragement for their efforts, which was found beneficial for agency also by Valtari (2016). Despite children's strive and educators' support, outside elements had an effect on their interactions and, consequently, on agency. The following section presents educators' view on what hindered and supported agency in the organizational context.

7.2 Organizational Culture as Hindering and Supporting Children's Agency

When talking about their understanding of children's agency, educators also referred to influences from the environment and specifically its organizational culture. Participants discussed the 'group care' nature of kindergarten and how not everything was possible. They acknowledged that this was often the first

experience of children in a social teaching and learning setting away from home with different schedules and rules. Under institutional practices here are documented factors that influence the daily life of the group. Under pedagogical beliefs are meant factors influencing the teaching and learning in the group. This chapter presents some of these aspects the educators considered to support or hinder children's agency.

7.2.1 Institutional Practices

Educators saw schedules as both supportive and hindering for children's agency. On one hand, they gave a sense of familiarity about what is to come. For example, educators used daily schedule cards to show children what would take place during the day - breakfast, play time, outside time, lunch, etc. This way, according to educators, children gained more ownership of their daily life.

However, schedules could also pose limitations due to time restraints. For instance, if the group needed to go outside at a certain time, children were given less independence and more assistance with dressing up. There was also less time to negotiate with or listen to the children. In one group, educators noticed that the afternoon often passed in transitioning from one routine to another, leaving children with little time to focus on a thing at a time. The constant 'on the go' created a feeling of stress for both children and educators. As a consequence, the educators decided to move snack time right after rest time, leaving sufficient time for play and getting ready to go outside. However, adjusting schedules to better serve the specific group, wasn't always possible.

Even though the previous example shows that educators were able to affect routines, they also admitted that those were set in advance with little knowledge about or involvement from the children in the present group. Sometimes, even the educators had no control over the schedule. An example of that was when routines depended on external factors, such as the time food was delivered. Lunch could not be served at random times or according to individual wishes because the food came in boxes that kept it warm and opening/closing the boxes would make the food cold. In addition, lunch was

also seen as a tradition that followed children in school and it was better to adjust to it now. Therefore, lunch hour appeared to be something beyond the direct influence of the educators or the children, associated with cultural and health recommendations. As one group discussed:

> You need to have a routine every day. And the meal times are quite structured if you think it's maybe every three hours for a child which is quite ok. And those are also the recommendations - that we eat every three hours. And so the sugar level is certain way. And we even have this book … ruokasuositus. (Interview 7)

However, if the situation did not involve other parties (e.g. other groups, food delivery, recommendations) the possibility of a change depended on the educators' awareness of including children in decisions. In one group, children were involved in changing rest time to 'siesta' that allowed movement and quiet activities. In another, children were consulted in designing the lunch menu. However, children in the first example could not decide whether or not to have rest time/siesta. Similarly, in the second example, children could decide the lunch menu but there were requirements that the food had to be nutritious and appropriate. Having a rest or eating healthy were non negotiable due to their impact on children's well-being.

In addition to schedules, group size and personnel-children ratio were considered influential for the children's agency. Participants thought that small group and enough educators meant more time for the children and more personalized approach:

> If we have more kids and it's very busy, sometimes you get lost … It really helps with a smaller group. We can really be there, meet their needs and dig a little deeper what's behind that certain kind of behaviour. (Interview 8)

Participants observed that physical settings could pose limitations. For example, in more than one group, not having a separate sleeping room required children to be quiet for the whole duration of rest time so they did not disturb others. Children, who did not sleep, were asked to stay in their own beds and keep quiet. In contrast, in groups with a separate sleeping room, children were

free to rest as long as they wanted or needed, and then move to another room to play. In some cases, educators pondered whether they should involve children in deconstructing rest time but admitted that the physical setting posed limitations for attempting that.

For some participants, creativity helped with overcoming the restrictions of the physical space. For instance, during dress up time, a child was placed away from the dress up area of the room to put his clothes on. This was necessary because space was limited, leading to the child getting easily distracted near other children. Afterwards, the educator congratulated the child on focusing on the task and wondered if that place had magical powers for him. The participant recalled the child pondering over the power of the 'magic place' and going there on his own accord the next dress up time. Similar situation occurred with another child who was more willing to put their overall on by themselves when the educator drew a comparison between the child and their favourite action hero.

It becomes evident that the physical setting and organization of daily life can support or hinder children's agency. Topics such as enough staff and space were discussed also by Lonka (2016). Her findings showed that small groups meant less stress for everyone, allowed for more individual attention and enabled children to be more active participants. Similarly to this study, Irtamo (2013) and Kankimäki (2014) observed that children rarely had influence on big decisions in daily life but they could influence on an individual and practical level on less important topics. Valtari (2016) observed that children's contribution was often restricted, revealing that adults saw children as simultaneously immature and unaware, but with unique knowledge. Next, I look at the pedagogical beliefs and their effect on agency from the perspective of the educators.

7.2.2 Pedagogical Beliefs

Educators talked about classroom management as a way to achieve certain teaching goals. Some participants referred to it as a tool for establishing control

in the group. It was their responsibility to ensure children's well-being and pedagogical development. For instance, educators assigned sitting places at the lunch table to create balance of talkative and quiet children, to prevent conflicts and to allow children from different cultures to interact with each other. Such decisions were made for the children and not with them, leaving them with no choice. This lack of involvement of the children was considered by some participants as limiting children's free will but ultimately unavoidable:

> [...] what limit you're trying to set cause it's important for kids also to know … not everything can be allowed … there are some manners that have to … like behaviors and things like that … important is like the way how you say it … you don't want to transmit it in a bad way. (Interview 1)

Forgoing the freewill of the child caused some educators to question their ways and to ponder alternative approaches:

> Sometimes, I do feel like we have to make decisions for them but then, when I go home, I feel like I was very strict with them or was it really needed that I should have raised my voice at them. I do feel bad about it later on. Like maybe there is a better way to handle this situation. (Interview 6)

In the words of another participant, it would be easy to command the children because "I'm in charge" but that will not be efficient or helpful for anybody (Interview 5).

Interestingly, educators often switched between 'we' and 'they' in the teaching-learning context. Sometimes, they referred to themselves and the children as ‘we’ - who are together in learning. Other times, they used ‘them’ - as children only. For example, children and educators (a 'we' case) solved together a problem regarding table setting but children (a 'they' case) were taught well in reference to table manners. Educators addressed the core of their relationship - as learning together or as teaching the children, as being leaders and followers or as being partners.

Generally, participants acknowledged that children were not inanimate objects such as 'robots' that come with a manual or 'puppets' that need controlling. However, they saw age and life experience as a limitation to agency

because of the lack of knowledge and skills. Participants commented that "there are really many things that [children] are not aware of yet, that they can't be aware of in life yet" (Interview 3) and, due to their age, "they're still really in their own universe" (Interview 4). Learning new skills and acquiring knowledge about life begins in ECEC. Consequently, educators expected more from older children. For instance, preschool age children were expected to "already have some experience … to be responsible for [their] own decisions". Participants believed that with age:

> [...] the child will grow up for also this kind of talk and this kind of decision making that 'Ok, I can choose now that I was really cold outside so maybe I need this.' or maybe 'I was really, really hot do I really need to put this now?!'. (Interview 7)

Educators thought that children's limited life experience and previously learned habits (e.g. mom feeding the child) affected their self-awareness ("it feels like she's not really understanding when she's hungry" - Interview 2) and confidence ("making them think about something and actually not to be scared of expressing their ideas" - Interview 6). However, some participants contested the age argument by drawing parallels between younger and older children:

> I think that kids have to learn through the experience … I'm talking about the toddler age. The older ones, they already have some experience. So I'm not trying to convince or change their mind - 'You're getting older, you're going to the school, you have to be responsible for your own decisions … Just go if you want'. But then again they'll say "I'm cold" … and here we are … same as toddler level. (Interview 9)

According to the participants, in order for a teaching-learning relationship to be effective, there needed to be trust between children and educators. Trust was seen both in terms of children trusting adults and of adults trusting children. In the first case, the child showed trust in the educator to care for, support and assist them. That was visible in instances where the children accepted the educators' lead without questioning or opposing. According to some of the participants, children knew not to resist educators' decisions because "they've learned that 'If I don't have a choice that means it's good for me.'" (Interview 3).

On the other hand, educators trusting children meant they were comfortable with letting children do things without worrying that they would cause themselves harm. Trust meant having more independence and responsibilities. For example, in one group, it was customary for children to help in the kitchen with preparing the snack but only after they understood the safety rules:

> He was helping me the other day to make porridge and he doesn't speak English yet so I was telling him, like hot and trying to show that 'Don't touch here' because I know, if I just say 'Hot', he might not understand that yet. (Interview 8)

Getting to know the children through observations and interactions allowed educators to predict children's behaviour in a given situation and, consequently, affected trust. As one participant put it "with some kids I wouldn't necessarily let them out of my eyes for a second in some situations so that might affect on the result" (Interview 8). Another participant cautioned that children could be 'sneaky' or test limits/educators to get their own way. However, educators also acknowledged that their personal beliefs and opinions affect their trust in children. This subjectivity, according to one participant, caused magnifying adults worries and undermining children's skills:

> I think often as teachers we overthink the safety … I think as adults we need to start to trust them - the children - a bit more. (Interview 3)

Some educators went further and openly criticised the overprotectiveness of adults. The same participant from the previous example further pondered the effect restricting children in learning experiences could have for their understanding of themselves as capable beings:

> It builds confidence that they can make good decisions. And that they can trust their own abilities. If we tell them that - they start to go some place - and then somebody tells them 'No'. Ok, their ability to make a decision has been interrupted by an adult. For what reason? The moment we kind of stop them it takes away any of their decision making kind of confidence and whether they can make good decisions. And also it's good that they learn. If they make mistakes with their decisions, it's ok to learn that lesson as well. They learn good problem solving skills as well when they make mistakes. (Interview 3)

Educators considered cooperation with parents also affecting the teaching-learning relationship between children and educators. Parents take a central place in ECEC (National core curriculum, 2019). In this study, the relationship with parents was seen in two different lights - as a partnership or as an authority. Generally, educators thought that parents had a deep knowledge of the child but not necessarily of kindergarten life (that children move outside, rather than stand still, therefore comfortable clothing is important). In some instances, educators thought that the parents did not understand the children's needs, therefore they had to 'advocate' on behalf of the child:

> Today one child said 'Mom told me that I need to put this fleece under' and I said 'Can you see that you already have quite a thick winter outfit, do you think you need fleece because it's plus seven?' 'No, I don't but mom said I need to'. So what we do in that kind of situation also is a tricky one. So quite often I say I can talk with mom that you went without it and if you feel cold then you can come and put more. (Interview 7)

However, in others examples, parents and educators agreed on what is the best for the child regardless of what the child wanted:

> The parents want him to sleep and actually he needs the sleep. I don't force him to sleep but I don't give him a book or anything. I just ask him to not disturb the other children. We often have conversations ... to make sure he understands that this isn't a punishment for him. (Interview 3)

All in all, educators' view on parents seemed to fluctuate between 'parents as the ones making decisions for the child' and 'parents needing to be educated about listening to and trusting their children'.

According to the participants in this study, their perceptions regarding teaching and learning, could affect children's agency. Unfortunately, educators saw their main responsibility as teaching and ensuring safety and that sometimes restricted children independence and freedom. Previous research cautioned about an imbalance between children's agency and educators' responsibilities (Akola, 2007; Irtamo, 2013; Laukkanen, 2010; Vartiainen, 2005; Thomayer, 2017). Age was acknowledged as hindering in the sense of less skills

and knowledge. This was also picked by Thomayer (2017) in her research. The involvement of parents interfered with children's agency indirectly. It was also studied by Tikka-Uguccioni (2016) and Toivonen (2017).

8 DISCUSSION

The results of this study showed educators' perspectives on children's agency as a process revolving around growing as an individual and learning through social interactions. The participants discussed agency as something present but not always consciously recognized by the children. On the contrary, it was observed that children often put themselves as disadvantaged in comparison to adults.

Participants acknowledged that there were differences between levels of skill and knowledge between them and the children and that often their will prevailed over the will of the children. This was seen as necessary for children's safety and well-being. However, the process of negotiating such outcomes made the difference between respecting and ignoring children's agency. Providing professional care in the early years, required close relationship with the children based on "confidence, sense of belonging and trust" (Lenaerts, Vandenbroeck and Bablavý, 2018, p. 53) but also aimed at promoting independence and responsibility (Colwell and colleagues (2015).

Educators saw children's agency as equality, accountability and inclusion. Equality was mentioned in the sense of treating children with respect and - despite their deficiencies regarding life knowledge and skills - appreciating and acknowledging their contribution to the social context (Lansdown, 2009; Lipman, 2014). Accountability was referred to as supporting children in learning through experience and accepting consequences of their own actions (Edwards, 2005; Lipponen ei al., 2018). Inclusion stood for involving children in decisions that impacted not only the individual but the whole group and accepting children's creative ways of communicating (Esser et al., 2016;Percy-Smith, 2010).

The participants also considered that cultural, organizational and historical traditions, as represented in institutional and pedagogical practices (Markström and Halldén, 2009), affected children's agency. The environment gave the frame into which children and educators interacted, both developing

and learning in the process (Edwards and D'Arcy, 2004). For the participants, agency was not about a child getting his or her will but about learning how to bring up own ideas, negotiate with others and reach an outcome that benefits all.

Choosing the right research methodology was crucial for the final results of this study. The use of qualitative methods allowed the participants wider boundaries to ponder and discuss, while acknowledging the subjectivity on my behalf. The results were an insightful perspective on how significant, but not necessarily obvious, children's agency is for these early childhood educators. For instance, during the interviews some participants commented that the topic was not something they consciously thought about due to the dynamic and intensive nature of their work. Others pondered if their understanding of agency was right and whether it matched with their colleagues' beliefs. It appeared challenging for many to separate agency from pedagogical activities, such as subject-oriented planning, implementing and evaluating. Based on these observations, it would be logical to conclude that discussing the topic of children's agency in working teams could strengthen educators' awareness and offer support for handling it more effectively in practice.

In terms of future studies, it would be interesting to explore the cultural aspect of children's agency. Even though no particular differences were observed between this study and previous ones, which took place in single culture environments, the idea of using different languages and having different perceptions of the child and ECEC, could bring interesting results.

In addition, exploring further children's agency in different environments (such as home and ECEC), drawing comparisons between them and observing how the agency evolves, could provide a more complex perspective on the phenomenon.

Another idea for a future study was about involving children in the organizational process of creating routines. Already in this study educators had to adjust the routines to fit the children better but could the children be involved more intensely in designing the daily schedule? What consequences

that might bring to the organizational culture and the children-educator relationship?

Away from the topic of routines, but along the lines of creative, humorous and playful approaches to interaction with children, emerges a question about the self-image of children. If accepting that reflecting on others and the environment defines the individual, it is reasonable to pose the question how does children's folklore (fairy tails, songs, rhymes) affect agency.

As the final stage of this work took place during challenging times for ECEC (a global pandemic), I started wondering about the place of agency in the virtual world. The routine interactions described by the educators who participated in this study become obsolete in distance learning. It would be interesting to know what new experiences emerged and how they affected children's agency.

9 TRUSTWORTHINESS

As a former teacher with foreign background in an English language daycare in Finland, I had certain preconceptions regarding the topic. However, I tried to be subjective throughout the data collection and analysis process and look at the research from an outside, literature-based perspective.

In the traditions of qualitative research, this study aimed at documenting the experience of the participants and should not be used to make any generalizations. In qualitative research, documenting and processing the collected data is highly dependent on the researcher, therefore a clear picture of the process is necessary for ensuring its trustworthiness (Nowell et al., 2017). According to Joffe (2012), thematic analysis represents a well-organized and fairly transparent account of the participants' meaning of the phenomenon that is being studied. Similarities and differences are systematized and documented in a clear manner aiming at dependability. Both previous literature and original ideas from the participants are used to support researcher's choices regarding theory and methodology (Nowell et al, 2017) but also ensure confirmability.

To ensure that the originality of the date was preserved but also systematically documented, I organized the expressions of the participants around similar ideas and topics using their original words. Using original quotes and references to previous studies allowed for more nuanced complexity and relativity to the topic of agency. Considering the interviews were done in English (a foreign language for most of the participants and for me), I tried to acknowledge that sometimes expressions and meanings differed between individuals but also not allow for my interpretations to change the participants' voices. Using an interview approach gave the opportunity to ask follow-up questions for clarification but I pondered the in-the-moment, one-time aspect in terms of depth and reflection.

When analysing the data, I was concerned with my role in influencing the outcomes. For that purpose, I kept a reflective journal where I recorded thoughts, impressions, understandings and questions that emerged at any time

when working with the data. This journal helped me differentiate between my personal stance and the participants' opinions. Documenting the various steps of the analysis also helped with organizing the final outcome.

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