Young Children's Agency

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Introduction

Recently, my grandson aged 15 months left a trail of devastation in the kitchen at his family home. While my daughter-in-law, who is his mother, was busy on the other side of the kitchen, he had opened the cupboard where the baking ingredients are stored. His mother turned around to see tins and packets scattered all over the floor as well as a generous layer of flour with little footprints in it. My grandson was heading out of the kitchen with floury feet. When she asked him 'Did you do that?', he walked back to the flour, looked up at her, then pointed to the mess, nodded and responded 'Yes'. His mother then asked him: 'Are you going to clean it up?' and he squatted and began moving the flour about before his mother handed him a little floor brush which he pushed around in a genuine effort to clean. This quotidian event at home exemplifies the opportunities the youngest member of our family has at home to learn through experience, play and exploration. It is also an example of the many affordances he is offered that enable him to choose what to do, and to act independently in line with what he decides. In short, it is an example of a little boy's agency at 15 months. In this paper I argue that young children's agency is important for their development and learning. I begin by exploring definitions of agency and children's agency. I then consider why young children's agency matters, before troubling some problems associated with young children's agency and proposing potential ways forward in reifying young children's agency.

What is agency?

Giddens (1984) theorises agency as one element of structuration, in which he sees social relations positioned 'across time and space in virtue of the duality of structure' (p.176). He posits that structure in the form of society's institutions and social practices influences individuals, whilst individuals can choose to act as active, independent agents in ways that can change structure. In this way, society's structure and individuals' agency operate in symbiosis (Giddens, 1984).

There is some consensus in the literature regarding how agency is defined. A core definition that is used commonly is 'capacity to act' (Emirbayer and Mische 1998:999; James and James 2008:9; Manyukhina and Wyse, 2019:223; Schatzki, 2024:1; Thomson and Maloy, 2022:27), though each source varies the definition slightly. Manyukhina and Wyse (2019: 223) propose that agency is the 'capacity to act independently' while James and James (2008: 9) define it as 'the capacity of individuals to act independently'. Thomson and Maloy (2022: 27) suggest that agency is 'the capacity to act, and to make choices and decisions about matters that concern you', and Schatzki (2024:1) contends that 'Agency is the capacity to act, alternatively, the exercise of this capacity. It is both a power and an actuality'. For Killeen,

Tillery and Carbera (2024:2), agency is ‘the power of choosing an action and effecting it. Sewell (1992:2) sees agency as ‘the efficacy of human action’, while Emirbayer and Mische (1998:999) align with structuration theory in their definition of agency as ‘a capacity to act rightly and effectively within particular concrete life circumstances’. Giddens himself (1984: 14) argues that agency requires the capability *and* ability ‘to deploy (chronically, in the flow of daily life) a range of causal powers, including that of influencing those deployed by others.’

The synthesis of definitions across the range of literature suggests that agency may be defined as an individual’s capacity, capability, ability, or power to make decisions, choose, influence and effect actions independently.

The term ‘agency’ is often used interchangeably with the terms autonomy and self-determination, but these three terms have different meanings (Sutterlüty and Tisdall, 2019). Whereas agency is widely defined as the capacity to act as outlined above, self-determination is seen as both the option to choose as a human characteristic *and* society’s affordances to make our own choices (Farini and Scollan, 2025). On the other hand, autonomy is recognised as ‘an inner endorsement of one’s actions, the sense that they emanate from oneself and are one’s own’ (Ryan and Deci, 1987:1025)

What is children’s agency?

OHCHR (2006) recognises that children are social actors from birth, and the idea of children’s agency has been leveraged powerfully within the field of ‘new’ sociology during the early part of the twenty-first century (Jenks, 2005; James, Jenks and Prout, 1998; Moss and Petrie, 2002). James et al. (1998: 6) argue that this phenomenon has led to ‘the recognition of children as particular persons.’ Nevertheless, whilst definitions of children’s agency have much in common with definitions of agency *per se*, the literature reveals nuanced differences. Oswell (2013: 42) posits that children’s agency is ‘the capacity to do things in the world, where that doing may be physical, cognitive, emotional or other, but such that “being able to do” implies that children are not passive “blank slates”’. This view suggests that children’s agency has implications for their education, as Manyukhina and Wyse (2019) observe. OECD (2019: 32) recognises that in school, ‘students have the ability and the will to positively influence their own lives and the world around them’ and defines student agency as the ‘capacity to set a goal, reflect and act responsibly to effect change. It is about acting rather than being acted upon; shaping rather than being shaped; and making responsible decisions and choices rather than accepting those determined by others’ (OECD, 2019: 32).

Equally, in considering children’s agency in relation to curriculum, Manyukhina (2022: 506) resonates with Giddens’ structuration theory (1984) by proposing that ‘the enactment of agency’ is contingent on both ‘appropriate structural opportunities’ and ‘individuals who believe themselves capable of acting upon them’. Similarly to agency *per se*, children’s agency is enacted in social contexts (Baker and Le Courtois, 2022; Gallagher, 2019;

Sutterlüty and Tisdall, 2019). Wyness (2014: 13) posits that 'Children as agents are immersed within the social world and thus embedded in relations within which they have a formative influence. The child agent is not only capable but also fully social.' Young children's presentations of agency in early childhood education (ECE) settings happen when the children have 'opportunities to influence and make choices about how and what they learn in order to demonstrate and expand their capabilities' (Colegrove, McManus, Adair & Payne, 2021). For children's agency to present and flourish, learning environments must, then, offer affordances that promote children's agency. Such affordances give the agentic learner power and control to choose to engage or not, and to direct their own actions and thoughts (Baker, Le Courtois, and Eberhart, 2021). However, this does not always happen.

Adults tend to retain power in their interactions with children, especially younger children. Although children sometimes attempt to resist adults' power by asserting their own agency, for example by non-compliance or having a tantrum, it is more usual for children to 'meekly conform' to avoid undesirable consequences (Jerome and Starkey, 2022: 440). When adults fail to share power with children, children are 'silenced...controlled, oppressed, labelled and limited' (Cannella, 2002:162); indeed, Fleet and Britt (2011: 143) observe that 'children are often the most silenced participants in the educative process'. Furthermore, younger children are unlikely to be afforded opportunities to make decisions about matters that affect them, including their education (Lundy, Murray, Smith and Ward, 2024).

Additionally, OECD (2019: 34) proposes that children's agency in educational settings 'requires the ability to frame a guiding purpose and identify actions to achieve a goal', suggesting that unlike adults, children are not afforded the option to exercise agency without a goal that is likely to have been decided by adults (Lundy et al, 2024). Despite this disparity, even the youngest children are capable of agency driven by their own intentionality. Delafield-Butt and Trevarthen (2020:1) argue that intentionality presents even before birth in the unborn child's movements which reveal their 'awareness and a curious interest in the world' which continue postnatally in response to their environment, indicating agentic neonates, infants and very young children.

As I have indicated above, there are similarities between agency *per se* and children's agency but there are also differences. Children's agency may by characterised as an individual child's capacity, capability and ability to choose, influence and effect actions, but it is unlikely to include the power, independence and decision-making that are features of an adult's agency. Children are only free to enact their agency if the social context they are in permits them so to do, and adults tend only to afford children agency if doing so suits the adult agenda.

Why does young children's agency matter?

Interest in children's agency increased exponentially during the first decades of the twenty-first century (Sutterlüty and Tisdall, 2019). It is crucial that young children experience agency for different reasons. Of particular importance for education are the associations of young children's agency with self-regulation and motivation, both of which promote young children's learning and academic success (Baker et al., 2021; Wang and Barrett, 2013). Self-

regulation supports executive functioning including working memory, and controls feelings, thoughts, actions and attention (Hautakangas, Kumpulainen and Uusitalo, 2021), while motivation - particularly intrinsic motivation - promotes learners' mastery, engagement and enjoyment in learning, typically in activities based on curiosity, exploration and play (Ryan and Deci, 2020).

Equally, sense of agency and the intentionality that accompanies it constitute senses of self, or 'how we experience ourselves in relation to others' (Stern, 1985:6). Senses of self 'provides a basic organising perspective for all interpersonal events' from infancy (Klein, 2012; Stern, 1985:6). Strong sense of self is associated with positive relationships, increased autonomy and positive self-esteem, whereas a weak sense of self can predict poor mental health (Flury and Ickes, 2007; Hanley and Garland, 2017).

Moreover, children's agency is related to children's rights (Jerome and Starkey, 2022). In part, this is because children's agency and their voices are interlinked (Maybin, 2013; Spiteri, 2024). Children's voices are not only their verbal contributions in social contexts but are also 'views of children that are actively heard and valued as substantive contributions to decisions affecting the children's lives' (Brooks and Murray, 2016). Children's agency underpins and is promoted by Article 12 in the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (OHCHR, 1989). Article 12 affords children who are 'capable of forming their own views' the right 'to express those views freely in all matters affecting the child, the views of the child being given due weight in accordance with the age and maturity of the child.' Lundy et al (2024) refute that 'age and maturity' limits the affordance of due weight to older children, arguing that the right of children to have their views 'given due weight' refers to *every* child who is 'capable of forming their own views'. Given that neonates' abilities to assert their identities, present with 'abstract structured knowledge' and demonstrate intentionality (Alderson, Hawthorne and Killen, 2008: 29; Delafield-Butt and Trevarthen 2020; Gopnik, 2011: 129-130), the youngest children are 'capable of forming a view', and by doing so demonstrate 'capacity to act'. Therefore, even the youngest children should be afforded the right to the views they form being 'given due weight'. Young children's right to express their views and have them taken seriously chimes with key features of agency; young children have 'capacities for informed decision-making' and young children's development is enhanced when adults share power with them, for example by attuning to their modes of communication (Lansdown and Karkara, 2006).

Some problems with young children's agency

Although there are good reasons why young children's agency matters, political, cultural, economic and social structures shape and limit young children's agency (Thomson and Maloy, 2022). James et al. (1998: 69) question whether affording children agency might have a perverse effect, by inhibiting childhood freedoms. However, as Thomson and Maloy (2022:27) observe, 'curriculum and pedagogical practices (both) limit and enable what students can do', so if we do not afford young children their right to be heard when they express their views about their education, we also deny young children the agency that could

illuminate their rich capacity to form their own views on matters that affect their lives (Lundy et al., 2024). Furthermore, early childhood policymakers tend to focus on young children's futures and what they may become, for example, orienting early childhood development, care and pre-primary education towards school readiness (United Nations, 2024, 4.2). Yet young children generally operate in the 'here and now' (Graue and Walsh, 1995), so they direct their agency to their present concerns. There exist, therefore, tensions for educators and parents between accommodating young children's agency, whilst also trying to adhere to policymakers' requirements.

How can we reify young children's agency?

If we believe that young children should have opportunities to be agentic, there are some directions of travel that we can take to improve matters. As a first step, policymakers, educators and parents must conceptualise children 'as capable thinkers and doers' (Adair, 2014: 236). Part of this conceptualisation would be attending more effectively to young children's concerns by seeing young children 'as human beings, not only "human becomings"' (Qvortrup, 1994: 18). Equally, if we accept that children's agency is bound inextricably to social structuration (Giddens, 1984), we must also work harder to provide structures that support children's agency. For example, in order to promote children's agency, educators need sufficient agency of their own to co-create curricula and pedagogies with children that afford the time, space, choices, opportunities for creativity that young children need to flourish (Adair, 2014; Colegrove et al., 2021). Enacting young children's agency in ECE settings requires greater equalisation of power relationships between adults and children, as well as educators who attend to children's voices in ECE settings, and pedagogies that foster young children's contributions and participation (Sirkko, Kyrönlampi, and Puroila, 2019). Furthermore, policymakers, educators and parents could focus more on turning participation rights policy into action, especially Article 12. As Lundy et al. (2024:11) assert, 'we should seek young children's perspectives on the quality of ECE wherever decisions are being made that affect them', whilst also acknowledging and explaining that it may not always be possible or desirable to pursue every suggestion made by every child.

In summary

In this paper, I have explored definitions of agency and children's agency and considered why young children's agency matters. I have troubled some problems associated with young children's agency and I have drawn on a range of sources to indicate potential ways to reify young children's agency at policy and practice levels. Children's agency is foundational for children's development, learning, education and lives from their earliest years (Adair, 2014; OECD, 2019; Wyse and Manyukhina, 2025). To this end, the agency that my 15-month-old grandson is fortunate to be afforded by his parents in their family home augurs well for his future.

Introduction to articles in this issue

The articles in this issue address four aspects of practice that address the topic of young children's agency in different ways: early educators' autonomy and agency, young children's social and emotional learning, young children as thinkers and early educators' professional development. The first article in the issue focuses on '*Educators' risk-taking in high quality early childhood education'* and is authored by Mandy Cooke, Frances Press and Sandie Wong. Katariina, Waltzer, Sirpa Kärkkäinen and Sari Havu-Nuutinen then report research focused on '*Early childhood professionals' pedagogical decision making'*. Next, Lynn Ang, Hannelie du Preez, Anna-Barbara Du Plessis, Liz-Marie Basson, Liesel Ebersöhn, and Qing Gu present their article on '*The role of ECDE in supporting learning and well-being in rural early childhood and primary schools in South Africa'.* Veronica Mctaggart, Simon Stephens and Rosemary McGill contribute an article entitled *'An examination of the development of children's social and emotional competencies in pre-school'.* Next, this issue features four articles about young children as thinkers: *'Using Philosophy for Children to Introduce the Living/Non-living Distinction in Kindergarten'* by Renia Gasparatou, Marida Ergazaki and Nikolitsa Kosmopoulou, *'Classroom interaction and metacognition by "enculturation" of thinking in early education'* by Isabel María Gómez-Barreto, Sonia Lara and Ruth Pinedo-González,*'"Young children nowadays are very smart in ICT": Preschool teachers' perceptions of ICT Use'* by Chuanmei Dong, and *'A Comparative Analysis of Creativity: Australian and Iranian Early Childhood National Policy Frameworks' by* Somayeh Ba Akhlagh and Nicole Leggett. Seongmi Lim has contributed *'Preservice Teachers' Perspectives of Play in Early Childhood Education'.* Jessie Ming Sin Wong, Venus Sin Yee Tong, Selina Chan and Man Chun contribute an article with the title *'Beyond Constraints: Interpreting Voices to Reframe Preparation of Teachers for Inclusive Kindergarten Classrooms'.* Xinyue Yang, Rahman Bin Abdul, Nazri Mohd and Yansong Sun have authored *'The impact of teachers' qualifications on early childhood children's development outcomes: A systematic literature review'.* An article entitled *'Quality Early Childhood Education and Care practices: skills, knowledge, and the graduate competencies'* from Eva Mikuska, Nikki Fairchild, Alex Sabine, and Sarah Barton completes the collection of articles for this issue of *International Journal of Early Years Education*.

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