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EDITORIAL



Agency, children's voice and adults' responsibility

The special issue comes at a time when children have lost extended periods of formal schooling due to the novel coronavirus pandemic that started in 2019. Children's social and academic lives have been upended, with those in the lowest resource contexts being affected most severely (Edwards 2021; Ford, John, and Gunnell 2021; Pascal et al. 2020). Investments in children's educational recovery force us to think about what education should be, who it is for, and how it might be enacted (e.g. Farquharson et al. 2021). It is therefore timely, and refreshing, to hear from a range of education professionals in this special issue on the topic of children's *agency* in their education.

We view agency in learning as a force for thoughts and actions originating in the learner, when individuals are acting deliberately rather than through automatisms, and which stems from control, participation, and willingness to engage (or not) in activities (Baker, Le Courtois, and Eberhart 2021). Therefore, agency encompasses self-awareness and self-belief (a cognitive dimension to agency), as well as the feeling of volition and empowerment that comes from being agentic (Ryan 2017; an affective dimension). This distinction is implicit throughout this collection of papers. For example, in the paper by Lynn Cedar and colleagues on children's agency in psychotherapy, a child describes his positive experience of being a co-researcher as 'being the hero', which suggests not only that he had awareness of his role as an active agent, but also that he had *experienced* it as empowering.

Agency within an ecosystem

Agency is not only a feature of a situation or the individual, but takes place within an ecosystem, i.e. interconnected, interdependent parts interacting in dynamic ways. The papers in this collection conceptualise agency as a 'socially situated capacity' (Manyukhina and Wyse 2019), and therefore emphasise that agency is not just an *ability* of a person, but also requires a *sense* of agency (the belief that one can act in the world) and *opportunities* for agency to be exercised. Understanding agency in this situated, interdependent way explains some salient themes throughout this issue which reflect a conception of agency in learning as being part of a broader classroom ecosystem. In particular, we note structural and social influences on classroom practices, and the importance of relationships to agency. We develop these themes below.

Agency through a social and structural lens

The papers in this issue make clear that children's agency in education is situated within a broader ecosystem, noting social and cultural forces around classrooms that influence children's opportunities for agency. Although this interplay is complex, these forces undoubtedly influence what happens in classrooms by defining expectations of behaviour and academic performance (Yana Manyukhina) or by affecting the ways in which discourses have suppressed certain issues in the classroom (such as race, ethnicity and equity) to the detriment of learners' agency (Rachel Boyle). Sue Rogers highlights the importance of physical spaces as well as norms around play which shape children's opportunities to engage in certain activities. The broader literature underlines how cultural expectations about

schooling and child-rearing affect children's experience of and ability to benefit from particular educational experiences (e.g. Wood 2014 on play-based approaches in early years settings).

Curriculum is one tangible structural and institutional feature that can restrict or provide opportunities for agency. This is the main focus of Manyukhina's work using critical discourse analysis to investigate opportunities for agency in the National Curriculum in England. It is also present in other papers in the collection. Boyle's work on ethnicity and agency highlights the potential of 'British values' in the curriculum to be an opportunity for discussion of ethnic identity and belonging, but which currently instead focuses on preventing radicalisation, which in turn can lead to disenfranchisement and maintain structural racism in the education system. Both of these papers join Keys-Adair's (2014) call for schools to be places that expand children's agency by increasing their capabilities and taking into account their cultural contexts. The collection of papers also provides examples of curricula that enhance agency by helping children act in the world (e.g. Lee Jerome and Hugh Starkey) or making their learning meaningful (Penny Hay).

Many of the papers also shine a light on the classroom *as part of* the broader world and the permeable border between the two. The 'Schools Without Walls' project (Hay) exemplifies what learning can look like when children build connections with the world around them. Jerome and Starkey describe the ways in which children's agency towards participation and citizenship in the wider world can be supported in the classroom. Both papers advocate for understanding education as extending beyond the realm of the classroom. This seems particularly relevant after two years of a global pandemic where education and learning have been forced to fit into spaces that were not designed for those purposes. A model of learning with more permeable boundaries between 'education spaces' and the rest of children's lives may elicit an increased sense of agency for learners.

Relationships as central to agency

One consistent theme in the special issue papers is the importance of relationships, feelings of belonging, and connecting learning to a sense of self. Indeed, as many of the papers demonstrate, agency is not maximised when thought of as a characteristic of an individual, but rather when viewed through the lens of interactions and interdependence between individuals. Other areas of research also emphasise the importance of feelings of relatedness for agency (Ryan and Deci 2000) as well as for learning (McNally and Slutsky 2018) and here the papers provide concrete examples of what this means in practice for education and learning. Jerome and Starkey develop the 'ecological' nature of children's agency, where children's agency is influenced by the groups they belong to. They also point out that a variety of relationships matter for children. Adult-child relationships as well as cooperative child-child relationships can be levers for children's agency. In discussing the experiences of mixed ethnicity children, Boyle shows that individuals' sense of identity, and having this identity recognised and valued, is essential to fostering children's agency.

Power dynamics also influence whether children can take up opportunities for exercising agency. Cedar and colleagues highlight how relationships and dynamics between children, as well as between adults and children, affect children's ability to become fully agentic. This joins other research which has shown that power imbalances as well as cultural stereotypes can hinder children's ability to participate in learning, or to do so authentically (Rainio and Hilppö 2017; Lomax 2012). What this suggests is that trust and the possibility of voicing disagreement are key to children being able to exercise their agency. Indeed, it is when children feel comfortable enough to voice disagreement with those in positions of power that we may be able to infer some experience of agency (as suggested by Cedar et al.). Adults, therefore, play an important role in providing spaces and cultures where this is possible (Roche 1996; Seidel 2001). The recommendations by Jerome and Starkey open avenues for how this may be done. When children lack these spaces, as a number of papers argue, their agency may only be expressed as resistance (Jerome and Starkey; Cedar et al.).

Children's voice

Despite the importance of agency for children's lives and learning, many papers note that children's voices are often marginalised or absent, not only in research but also often in practice. Several of the papers call for putting more value on young learners' own voices and experiences when it comes to decisions that affect them. Manyukhina's paper underscores how the National Curriculum in England fails to provide children with genuine opportunities and support to exercise agency, rather than simply practice skills and acquire knowledge. Rogers highlights that children's perceptions on the measures taken during the coronavirus pandemic lockdowns were not often considered, and demonstrates that the focus on a 'catch-up' narrative excludes children's own needs for play. Cedar et al. also emphasise the lack of research methods that amplify children's experiences of therapy, which is why the authors actively seek children's views and participation. Tuning into children's voices is perhaps most explicitly exemplified in Lorenzo Manera's paper on the Reggio Emilia approach, which centres the child and the 'hundred languages', or multiple ways, children express themselves, through physical, pictorial, verbal and other means of communicating and connecting with those around them.

Whilst voice and participation are recurring themes in this special issue, many of the authors also point out that simply giving children a forum to voice ideas does not result in agency if those views are never acted on. In order to have agency, children, therefore, need the possibility of influencing decisions that affect them, rather than only voicing views. In addition, the notion of 'listening' is not only about opportunities for children to verbalise views, but about 'an active process of receiving, interpreting and responding to [children's] communications' (Pascal and Bertram 2009, 255).

Adults' responsibility

More than providing opportunities and simply putting the onus on the learner, viewing agency as an ecosystem reminds us that children need to be supported to make the most of opportunities; it's not simply about providing them. Play, for example, as a way of learning, can be highly agentic, but may require some signposting and for a skilled adult to act as a guide for the child, especially those who live in homes where play, choice and agency are not commonplace. Jerome and Starkey discuss this crucial role of adults in making 'judgements and interventions which serve to gradually increase children's agency'. In particular, they suggest that agency should not be viewed as a binary (either being present or absent), but rather can be 'thickened or thinned', with adults having to adapt to individual situations and the needs of children.

The papers in the special issue suggest a critical role of training for professionals. We welcomed the strong emphasis on initial teacher training in Boyle's paper on mixed ethnicity learners, and on the training for play workers in Rogers' paper. We challenge those who make decisions about training standards to acknowledge the centrality of children's agency in their education and learning, and to invest in training that responds to the human need for agency.

Viewing agency in education as situated and interdependent (arising from individual capacity, individual experience, and available opportunities) points to an important issue of social justice in education. It is not enough to adopt policies that 'provide opportunities' for all learners, if we know that they arrive in the early years and throughout their education with varying individual capacities and experiences. From a system-wide perspective, this means investing in support for learners to experience agency. From an individual perspective, this means valuing differences and providing pedagogical bridges for learners coming from different places to be able to engage meaningfully in their own learning.

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