



# AGENCY IN EARLY YEARS EDUCATIONAL CONTEXTS

Heidi Sairanen  
PhD researcher

The Joy of Learning Multiliteracies  
Research and Development Programme (MOI)  
Learning, Culture and Interventions Expert Group  
Faculty of Educational Sciences  
University of Helsinki, Finland  
heidi.sairanen@helsinki.fi

## INTRODUCTION

The aim of this dissertation is to investigate children's and teachers' agency in different early years educational activity contexts where in some of them learning multiliteracies were emphasized. This study focuses on the early years as a social context and as an important developmental age in human's life. In respecting the voices and participation rights of children, and regarding children as important knowledge producers, this dissertation emphasizes children's and teachers' perspectives of their own agency. This research is prevailing because 1) children's agency is emergently recognized but still the research is lacking knowledge how agency is manifested itself and 2) teacher's agency especially in early years settings needs to be investigated more. This dissertation includes three studies.

## THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This sociocultural (see e.g. Wertsch, del Rio & Alvarez, 1995) case study defines agency as a pivotal element in early years learning and development and in human's life as a whole. Agency evolves in interaction between the individual and the social context of people and material resources (Biesta & Tedder, 2006). Education should create opportunities for active agency where responsible, thoughtful and transformative dispositions evolve and affect in humans lives as a whole (Emirbayer & Mische, 1998). In Finnish ECEC agency is recognized as something what education should appreciate and develop (National Core Curriculum for Early Childhood Education and Care 2016, 2017).

## RESEARCH QUESTIONS

1. How children's agency manifests itself in early years education contexts?
2. How children's agency manifests itself in children's peer interaction which is mediated by their teacher?
3. How early years teachers' agency manifests itself when teaching multiliteracies?

## METHODS

This study is a qualitative case study and emphasizes children's and teachers' voice through visual narrative inquiry, interviews, video-data and observations.

## STUDY I

**A visual narrative inquiry into children's sense of agency (Sairanen & Kumpulainen, 2014)**

Study I is a case study which focuses on children's sense of agency and has two objectives: (a) to portray the modalities of children's sense of agency in preschool and first grade settings, and (b) to identify the sociocultural resources that mediate children's sense of agency in these two activity contexts. We seek to achieve these objectives through a visual narrative inquiry that entails the children's (N:5) photo-narration of their sense of agency in preschool and primary school settings. The results indicate the sociocultural embeddedness of the children's sense of agency. They also show continuities and discontinuities in the children's sense of agency across the preschool and first grade settings. The children's sense of agency was mediated by people and material artefacts, as well as by the rules, objectives, time-structures, and social interactions of the activity contexts. These findings are pivotal in understanding how to support the educational engagement of children and their positive transition to school. The study also shows how visual narrative inquiry offers a potential methodology for listening to children, especially in terms of their sense of agency.



Figure 1. I am able to reach higher

## STUDY II

**Finnish teachers making sense and promoting multiliteracies in early years education (Sairanen, Kangas & Sintonen, to be published)**

Study II explores how Finnish teachers (n=4) use and make sense of the materials developed by the MOI program for promoting young children's multiliteracies. The MOI-materials including *Whisper of the Spirit* used by these teachers are open source, open ended, and non-prescriptive activity cards. The teachers have not been asked to use the self-selected material; but, instead they have personally found them significant to use in their teaching. In our chapter, we ask how do teachers promote children's multiliteracy learning through versatile play, digital production and multimodal practices through the MOI-material and how is the use of the MOI-material adapted by teachers in local contexts. In this respect, we hence look into the teachers' agency in designing and conducting multiliteracy pedagogy. The chapter is structured around four teachers' semi-

structured interviews and shows how the teachers made sense of the MOI-material in their efforts to promote young children's multiliteracies, and how they applied the materials in their teaching in local contexts. Opportunities and challenges will be identified and discussed.



Figure 2. *Whisper of the Spirit*

## STUDY III

**Agency and interaction: Young children creating culture (Sairanen, to be published)**

Study III explores (a) how 5-years-old children (n=8) create culture together and with their teacher in joint activity which enhances multiliteracies and (b) how children's agency manifests itself in interaction with the peer group and with their teacher. In this study the culture is understood something what children and their teacher create through interaction. The study takes place in Finnish early childhood education centre. The activities which enhance multiliteracy are based on MOI-material called *Whisper of the Spirit*, which has been developed by artists and the University of Helsinki's researchers. The case data was collected by videoing and observing the activities.

## PRELIMINARY CONCLUSIONS

The preliminary conclusions of this study shows how children's and teachers' agency is manifested in early years educational contexts.

## REFERENCES

- Biesta, G. & Tedder, M. (2006). How is agency possible? Towards an egological understanding of agency-as-achievement. Retrieved from: [http://www.tlrp.org/project/sites/LearningLives/papers/working\\_papers/Working\\_paper\\_5\\_Exeter\\_Feb\\_06.pdf](http://www.tlrp.org/project/sites/LearningLives/papers/working_papers/Working_paper_5_Exeter_Feb_06.pdf)
- Emirbayer, M., & Mische, A. (1998). What is agency? *American Journal of Sociology*, 103(4), 962–1023. Retrieved from <http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.1086/231294>.
- National Core Curriculum for Early Childhood Education and Care 2016. (2017). Finnish National Agency for Education. Regulations and guidelines 2017:10.
- Sairanen, H. & Kumpulainen, K. (2014). A Visual Narrative Inquiry into Children's sense of Agency in Preschool and First Grade. *International Journal of Educational Psychology*, 3(2), 141–174.
- Wertsch, J., del Rio, P., & Alvarez, A. (1996). Sociocultural studies: history, action, and mediation. In Wertsch, J. del Rio P. & Alvarez, A. (Eds.), *Sociocultural Studies of Mind* (pp. 1–34). Cambridge: Cambridge University.