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# **TOWARDS RELATIONAL AGENCY IN FINNISH EARLY YEARS PEDAGOGY AND PRACTICE**

**Heidi Sairanen**

DOCTORAL DISSERTATION

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**Towards Relational Agency in Finnish Early Years Pedagogy and Practice**

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**Abstract**

This socioculturally-framed doctoral dissertation focuses on understanding and researching agency in early years pedagogy from the perspective of both children and teachers in Finnish early childhood education (ECE), pre-primary education and early primary education. In the study, agency is understood as a relational activity and underscores the interactional nature of agency that is constructed into being between people, environment and cultural resources in context. This understanding of agency has been applied in three independent studies that uncover the relational nature of agency (respectively) in children transitioning from pre-primary education to primary education (Study 1); in teachers' work whilst creating the early years pedagogy according to the new Finnish national core curriculum recommendations on the enhancement of children's multiliteracies (Study 2); and finally, in the interactions between children and teachers in everyday ECE practices (Study 3).

This doctoral dissertation consists of three sub-studies published as articles and a summary. Study 1 is an investigation of children's (aged 5–7 years) sense of agency across time and space through a framework of modalities of agency. The methodological approach applied in the study drew on visual ethnography that afforded the children with multimodal tools to express and make meaning of their agency in the context of their educational transition. The study makes visible the sociocultural resources that mediated the children's sense of agency in transition from pre-primary education to primary education.

Study 2 is an investigation of agency between two ECE teachers and two pre-primary teachers when they designed and conducted multiliteracy pedagogy in accordance with new curriculum requirements. The analysis of the teachers' interviews (video and audio data) makes it evident how the open curriculum, along with the teachers' professional skills and enthusiasm for pedagogical design, were associated with their agency.

Study 3 had as its focus an investigation of children's initiatives and ECE teachers' responses in the everyday life of the ECE classroom as a means to understand how children's agency is relationally facilitated or hindered. A detailed interaction analysis of the video data of children's (n=8) and teachers' (n=2) interaction revealed several modes through which the children communicated their initiatives and how teachers responded to these initiatives, thereby resulting in the creation of an analytical typology of agency. The results revealed adult-child relationships that give rise to a range of opportunities for children's agency from the relational perspective.

Overall, the results in this doctoral dissertation contribute to early years pedagogy in Finnish education by revealing how agency is relationally

constructed in sociocultural contexts across children, teachers, and the socio-material and cultural environment. This study introduces potential visual and participatory methods to investigate agency in the everyday lives of young children and their teachers in contextually and culturally sensitive ways. These methods also have the potential to guide teachers' pedagogical work in the early years.

In addition, the results show the importance of examining the power relations and roles between children and teachers in early years pedagogy and how they should be reflected upon and revised if necessary. Examining and (re)building early years pedagogy with children and teachers creates opportunities for relational agency in which both children and teachers can be empowered. The results bring new knowledge for pedagogical efforts, the aim of which is to recognise and enhance children's agency in early years education. When developing pedagogy, the aim of which is to support agency, it is important to concentrate on listening to both children and teachers, and acknowledging children's initiatives.

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*Keywords:* Relational agency, early childhood education, pre-primary and primary education, early years pedagogy, sociocultural theory, visual and participatory research

**Heidi Sairanen**

**Kohti jaettua toimijuutta pienten lasten pedagogiikassa:  
Tutkimuksia suomalaisista kasvatus- ja koulutuskäytännöistä**

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**Tiivistelmä**

Sosiokulttuuriseen teoriaan pohjautuva väitöskirjani tarkastelee ja tutkii toimijuutta pienten lasten pedagogiikan viitekehyksessä suomalaisen varhaiskasvatuksen sekä esi- ja alkuopetuksen kontekstissa lasten ja opettajien näkökulmasta. Tutkimus ymmärtää toimijuuden relationaalisesti ja sosiokulttuurisesti rakentuvana toimintana, joka ilmenee ihmisten välisessä vuorovaikutuksessa, sekä ympäristön ja kulttuuristen resurssien välillä. Tämä sosiokulttuurinen näkemys toimijuudesta sisältyy kolmeen yksittäiseen tutkimukseen, jotka avaavat relationaalista toimijuutta lasten siirtyessä esiopetuksesta perusopetukseen (tutkimus 1), opettajien pedagogisessa työssä uuden opetussuunnitelman ja siinä olevan monilukutaidon pedagogiikan suunnittelussa ja toteutuksessa (tutkimus 2) ja lasten ja opettajien vuorovaikutuksessa varhaiskasvatuksen arjessa (tutkimus 3).

Väitöskirjani sisältää kolme artikkelia sekä tiivistelmän. Ensimmäinen tutkimus tutkii 5-7-vuotiaiden lasten toimijuuden kokemuksia toimijuuden modaliteettien avulla esi- ja alkuopetuksen siirtymässä ensin esiopetuksessa ja sitten koulun ensimmäisellä luokalla. Tutkimuksen metodologisena lähestymistapana käytetään visuaalista etnografiaa, jonka avulla tutkitaan miten lapset ilmaisevat itseään sekä toimijuuden kokemuksiin multimodaalisten välineiden avulla koulusiirtymän aikana. Tutkimuksen avulla voi huomata kuinka sosiokulttuuriset resurssit loivat merkityksiä lapsille heidän siirtyessään esiopetuksesta alkuopetukseen.

Toinen tutkimus tutkii kahden esiopetuksen opettajan ja kahden varhaiskasvatuksen opettajan toimijuutta heidän suunnitellessa ja toteuttaessa monilukutaidon pedagogiikkaa uuden opetussuunnitelman mukaisesti. Opettajien avointen haastatteluiden analyysi tuo esille miten avoin opetussuunnitelma, sekä opettajien asiantuntijuus sekä innokkuus toteuttaa uutta opetussuunnitelmaa ovat sidoksissa heidän toimijuuteen.

Kolmas tutkimus tutkii lasten aloitteita ja opettajien vastauksia varhaiskasvatuksen arjessa ja pyrkii ymmärtämään, miten lasten toimijuus toteutuu tai hankaloituu relationaalisesti. Videoaineiston yksityiskohtainen vuorovaikutusanalyysi toi esiin lasten (n=8) ja opettajien (n=2) vuorovaikutuksessa useita lasten aloitteita sekä opettajien vastauksia, jotka yhdessä muodostivat analyttisen toimijuuden typologian. Tulokset tuovat esille lasten ja opettajien välisen vuorovaikutuksen, joka antaa toimijuudelle mahdollisuuksia ja toisaalta estää toimijuuden toteutumisen.

Tutkimustulokset osoittavat kuinka toimijuus rakentuu relationaalisesti suomalaisessa varhaiskasvatuksen sekä esi- ja alkuopetuksen pedagogiikassa sosiokulttuurisessa kontekstissa lasten, opettajien, sekä sosiomateriaalisten ja -kulttuuristen resurssien välillä. Tulokset esittelevät potentiaaliset visuaaliset

ja osallistavat menetelmät, joita voi konteksti- ja kulttuurikohtaisesti hyödyntää tutkittaessa lasten ja opettajien arkea varhaiskasvatuksessa. Metodit auttavat myös opettajia heidän pedagogisessa työssä.

Tutkimustulokset tuottavat tärkeää tietoa lasten ja aikuisten valtasuhteista ja rooleista, ja siitä kuinka näitä tulisi tarvittaessa pohtia ja muokata. Lapset ja opettajat voimaantuvat, kun he tarkastelevat ja muokkaavat yhdessä pedagogiikka ja oppimisympäristöjä. Tulokset luovat uutta tietoa lasta kuuntelevasta pedagogiikasta, joka edistää lasten toimijuutta. Kun toimijuutta mahdollistavaa pedagogiikkaa kehitetään, on tärkeää kuunnella lapsia sekä opettajia ja huomioida lasten aloitteet.

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*Avainsanat:* Relationaalinen toimijuus, varhaiskasvatus, esi- ja alkuopetus, pienten lasten pedagogiikka, sosiokulttuurinen teoria, visuaalinen ja osallistava tutkimus

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Over a decade ago, when I entered the doors of University of Helsinki as an enthusiastic teacher student in early childhood education, I became interested in early years pedagogy. During the years my interest in early years pedagogy has intensified and now I am at the point of contributing to the field with my thesis. The journey has included ups and downs but now it is finally reaching its end. However, I would have not been able to reach this milestone alone. I am more than thankful for everyone who has contributed in this thesis.

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Helsinki, July 27, 2020  
Heidi Sairanen

# LIST OF ORIGINAL PUBLICATIONS

This thesis is based on the following publications:

- I 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. <http://dx.doi.org/10.4471/ijep.2014.09>
- II Sairanen, H., Kangas, J., & Sintonen, S. (2019). Finnish teachers making sense of and promoting multiliteracies in early years education. In Kumpulainen, K. & Sefton-Green, J. (Eds.) *Multiliteracies in Early Years Innovation: Perspectives from Finland and Beyond* (pp. 42–60). London: Routledge.
- III Sairanen, H., Kumpulainen, K., & Kajamaa, A. (2020.) An Investigation into Children's Agency: Children's Initiatives and Practitioners' Responses in Finnish Early Childhood Education. *Early Child Development and Care*. Published online. 1–12. <https://doi.org/10.1080/03004430.2020.1739030>



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# 1 INTRODUCTION

The Finnish early childhood education (ECE) has a long tradition of child-centred pedagogy, in which children's opinions, initiatives, and thoughts have been the centre of pedagogical activities. The Finnish early years curricula (2016a; 2016b; 2018) define pedagogy as requiring a multidisciplinary understanding of educational sciences and early years education for supporting children's learning and well-being. The current curricula (2018; 2016a; 2016b) for early years education (for children 0-8 years of age), position children at the centre of pedagogy, and state that children's active agency must be taken into consideration and promoted. While acknowledging the importance of pedagogy, which is based on children's initiatives and agency, it is recognised to be difficult to realise in practice (Lipponen & Kumpulainen, 2011).

The Finnish early years curricula resonate with the international literature, which defines the importance of agency at least on two levels in people's lives and particularly those of children. First, agency is important in itself. Having a say and impact on one's own life is an important part of human agency (Biesta & Tedder, 2006; Ecclestone, 2007). Second, through agency, children build their identities as they present their opinions, suggest, ideate, and guide situations and thereby make a difference in the environment in which they are acting. Education should provide opportunities for young children to take part, to create knowledge and have the ability to participate, agree, and disagree (see Stetsenko, 2013), and particularly participate in their own learning (Biesta & Tedder, 2006; Gresalfi, Martin, Hand, & Greeno, 2009; Engle & Conant, 2002; Kumpulainen & Lipponen, 2010; Kumpulainen, 2013). The United Nations Convention of the Rights of the Child has been an important springboard for valuing children's agency and constructing an understanding of children as capable human beings, and decision-makers, (i.e. active agents) (Einarsdottir, 2007; Cook & Hess, 2007; Wyness, 1999; Marr & Malone, 2007; The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, 1989; Biesta & Tedder, 2006).

The focus of this doctoral dissertation is on agency in Finnish early years education from the perspective of both children and teachers.<sup>1</sup> It generates new knowledge of how agency is interactively and relationally constructed in early years learning. Through micro-level analysis, in this dissertation I have revealed how agency is promoted or hindered in early years education. The overall objective with this dissertation is to create an understanding regarding

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<sup>1</sup> In this dissertation I refer mainly to teachers because in Finland the teacher has the main responsibility for the pedagogy, although I acknowledge that in Finnish ECE, pre-primary and primary education other occupational groups work with children as well. Read more about the qualifications of the early years teachers in Chapter 4.

relational agency and to discover what is required for a pedagogy that respects and supports children's agency. In order to get a grasp of this, this light has been shed on the sociocultural resources which mediate children's sense of agency; children's initiatives and ECE practitioners' responses to them have been discovered, and how teachers' agency is promoted through pedagogical design has been described, as well as how this is related to promoting children's agency.

In addition, this dissertation contributes to the discussion on early years curriculum. Namely, it addresses agency in Finnish early years curricula and presents discussion of multiliteracy as transversal competence (see Välijärvi & Sulkunen, 2016) mentioned in curricula (Kumpulainen & Sefton-Green, 2019). The tradition in early years curricula in Finland emphasises play, which has been shown to be an activity in which children are able to take initiatives, affect, ideate, and take a lead (e.g. Rainio, 2010, Pramling Samuelsson & Asplund Carlsson, 2008; Van Oers & Duijkers, 2012; also, FNAE, 2018; 2016a; 2016b)—that is, exercise agency. Pedagogy, which takes account of and promotes children's agency, requires understanding of children's agency. The aim with this dissertation was to provide new knowledge on agency in early years pedagogy and learning environments, with a particular focus on interaction between children and teachers, children's sense of agency in different early years' learning environments, and the connection between children's and teachers' agency. Although valuing children's opinions and ideas have increasingly been at the centre of interest of researchers, policymakers, and practitioners, we still lack research knowledge and understanding of how to promote children's agency in early years classroom activities and what underlies the pedagogy which considers children's agency, particularly in the early years learning contexts.

In this thesis, I aimed to provide an expanded understanding of children's and teachers' agency in early years contexts in Finland, by examining how agency manifests itself in children's and early years practitioners' interactions in sociocultural contexts. In doing so, the research aims to apply the concept of relational agency in early years pedagogy. Promoting and maintaining learners' agency calls for pedagogy which understands how agency is built and constructed. In addition, this thesis introduces a variety of visual and participatory research methods that can create novel understanding of how agency can be investigated in the early years educational context. By investigating the interaction between children and early years practitioners and zooming into children's initiatives and practitioners' responses to create new knowledge, this research reveals what is required to promote children's agency on the level of every-day interaction.

In sum, in this dissertation, relational agency has been approached in three separate contexts by studying children's sense of agency in transition from pre-primary education to primary education, teachers' pedagogical design in ECE and pre-primary education, and interaction between children and teachers in everyday ECE activities. In doing so, this dissertation elaborates

and contributes to several important issues surrounding early years pedagogy—namely, educational transitions, implementing new curriculum, and adult-child interaction.

## 2 PREVIOUS RESEARCH ON AGENCY IN EDUCATION

Agency is recognized as an invaluable part of human lives; in most Western societies, agency has a long history of attracting the interest of researchers. In educational research, agency has been increasingly attracting researchers' interest, particularly among young children (Biesta & Tedder, 2006; Rainio, 2010; Hilppö, 2016). Agency is considered to be important from the viewpoint of children's development and education (Ecclestone, 2007). According to Ecclestone, Biesta and Hughes (2010) education holds an important role in people's lives in terms of achieving agency. Agency is important in building identity (Ecclestone, 2007), as agentic processes demand 'self-direction, self-efficacy, opportunities to achieve agency, and desire to shape a specific field or context'. Hence, apart from offering knowledge and skills, education must offer opportunities for agency (Ecclestone, Biesta & Hughes, 2010).

Agency has previously been theorised in the research literature from various viewpoints. The individualist approach of agency understands agency as a human's individual attainment. This theoretical notion emphasises agency as an intrinsic value of humans, who either possess it or do not possess it. According to an individualist approach, the teacher holds the power to provide the opportunity to exert agency among individual children. In addition, individualistic theories emphasise agency as enacted through choice (Charteris & Smardon, 2018). Ryan and Deci (2000) relate agency to self-determination theory and argue that when people are in their fullest potential, they are agentic and strive to learn and master new skills. Thus, while individual agency concentrates on an individual and the individual's development, relational agency can be defined as 'a capacity to align one's thought and actions with those of others in order to interpret problems of practice and to respond to those interpretations' (Edwards, 2005, 169). Transformative agency, as one research branch, is similar to relational agency as being relational between an individual and his/her environment (Haapasaari, Engeström and Kerosuo, 2016). Transformative agency breaks the existing frames of activity and transforms them into something new (Virkkunen, 2006) through a process of contradictions and conflicts.

Acknowledging the similarities with the transformative approach and conceptual differences with the individual framing of agency, I employed a relational perspective (Edwards, 2005; 2011) on agency within a sociocultural theoretical framework (Vygotsky, 1978; Bruner, 1996). The relational approach emphasizes agency as an activity between individuals and the context which surrounds them, extending to their capacity to utilize this interactional environment around them (Edwards, 2005). Sociocultural theory, developed by Lev Vygotsky (e.g. 1978), argues that people do not live

in a vacuum, but interact with each other and the environment around them; hence, it is these interactional contexts in which agency is relationally constructed.

## 2.1 THE SOCIOCULTURAL APPROACH TO AGENCY

Agency develops through interaction between individuals and their environment (Biesta & Tedder, 2006; Edwards & Mackenzie, 2008). As a simplifying definition, agency can be defined as an individual's capacity to act and make choices (Ecclestone, Biesta & Hughes, 2010, p.10). Hence, agency can be considered to be an individual's capacity to make choices and to act independently by utilizing the social environment around them. Agency is constantly developing and is mediated by the environment in which people act and by the cultural tools which people have developed over time (see Bruner, 1996; Kumpulainen, Kajamaa & Rajala, 2018).

Following sociocultural theorising of agency, children's agency evolves in interaction with their sociocultural environment (Vygotsky, 1978; Bruner, 1996; Wertsch, del Rio & Alvarez, 1995). Their environment is built from various interactions and social relationships with material resources (Barron, 2006) in various contexts in which agency manifests itself. Thus, agency is not an established state of activity but one that develops constantly with the interaction between the individuals and their environment and is dependent on the interaction and the environment (Biesta & Tedder, 2006). Further, children do not live unattached from others but interact with people and the environment around them, and this environment includes cultural and material artefacts (see e.g. Lipponen & Kumpulainen, 2011; Kajamaa & Kumpulainen, 2019). The environment is integral to individuals achieving agency. Although agency is defined and conceptualised in the relationship between individuals, agency must not be understood as an individual's attainment, nor is it a qualitative measure of human greatness. Children are not purely independent actors; hence, their actions are reflections of other people and the activities they are involved in (Emirbayer & Mische, 1998; Holland, Lachicotte, Skinner, & Cain, 1998; Prout, 2005; Greeno, 2006; Kumpulainen, Kajamaa & Rajala, 2018).

Recently, Rajala (2016) studied agency in the context of school by creating an agency-centred approach to pedagogy. In his study he discovered that the pedagogy must be defined broadly so that school learning supports the creation of agency. Thus, the pedagogy should provide opportunities for children to bring their experiences from outside school into the classroom and use them as mediational means in the pedagogy design as Silseth and Erstad (2018) highlight in their study. Further, Hilppö (2016) has studied agency in a sociocultural context in education and addressed children's sense of agency.

He examined children's agentic experiences in their formal and informal environments, concentrating on children in third grade and children in pre-primary education. His study revealed that promoting children's sense of agency requires adults to concentrate on the small agentic moments in children's everyday lives, which are potentially to develop meaningful moments for children to acknowledge their agency.

In his research, Hilppö (2016) employed Jyrkämä's (2008) modalities of agency to study children's sense of agency. The modalities offer an analytical tool through which to discover a sense of agency. The modalities of agency account for children's sense of agency as a sense of

- being able to do something;
- knowing how to do something;
- wanting to do something;
- having the possibility to do something;
- having to do something; and
- feeling, experiencing, and appreciating something

These modalities enable a discovering of children's expectations, beliefs, and competencies in the environments in which they act. Moreover, these modalities illuminate how children sense the possibilities, and restrictions offered by social, material, and cultural contexts and how the environment promotes or hinders their agency. This enables a discovery of the opportunities and limitations of children's agency in social environments and insights into how children transform those contexts. I have also employed modalities of agency to discover children's sense of agency and widened them to discover their sense of agency across time and space (see Archer, 2000).

## 2.2 POSITIONING THIS STUDY

My dissertation considers agency to be a relational and socioculturally embedded activity and focuses on the interaction between people, environment, and the cultural tools employed in the environment, and the negotiation through which agency is constructed. This dissertation employs the relational approach to agency in early years pedagogy has been employed and follows the sociocultural theorising of agency in education. Further, in this dissertation, agency has been approached as an empirical matter in children's and teachers' activities in early years education contexts emphasising pedagogy. Stemming from the recent research of childhood (e.g. Corsaro, 2018) in which children are seen as active knowledge builders and authors of their lives who are an intrinsic part of the development of the communities where they act, they are understood to be active knowledge builders and agents

who take part in collective activities with others. Although every child has been recognised as an individual in this dissertation, it does not acknowledge that children's agency is innate. As children's agency develops in interaction between children and the environment, it is worthwhile to zoom in on what happens in interaction between children and teachers, and children and the educational environment in which they act when discovering agency in early years learning. The sub-studies that make up this dissertation contribute to the research of educational transitions, implementing new curriculum and interaction between children and teachers and although they are distinguished and highly acknowledged research areas, there is a research gap since little research has examined deeply the concept of relational agency in Finnish early years educational context.

The literature of agency emphasises temporal aspects of agency (Emirbayer & Mische, 1998). Agency holds orientations of temporality, that is, agency develops in connection with temporal dimensions, the past, the present, and the future which affect agency. Past, present, and future are interwoven in agency, as an actor reflects on past experiences, orients themselves to the future options, and reflects these during the present activities (Emirbayer & Mische, 1998; Biesta & Tedder, 2006; Ecclestone, 2007). Consequently, children among all humans form their identities in relation to the past, the present, and the future and their agency develops between the child and the material and cultural environment around them (Kumpulainen, Kajamaa & Rajala, 2018). Children's experiences in different environments form their identity and their sense of agency (see e.g. Bruner, 1987) and are connected in how they reflect on themselves and how they form their sense of agency as individuals. Systematic analysis of children's sense of agency and how they orient their mind towards past, present, and future is lacking (Haapasaari, Engeström & Kerosuo, 2016).

Research on agency in educational contexts is critical of education for having failed to support agency in everyday lives of children and pupils (see e.g. Rainio, 2010; Rajala, 2018). Agency in early years education is complex and manifold as a child can be contextualised at the same time as needy and incomplete who needs an adult to survive and on the other hand, a child can be seen as a competent and active agent who has a say concerning his/her life. That is why power relations are an issue to take account when concerning young children's agency (see e.g. Rainio, 2010). Rainio's research on children's play and peer interactions have been the focus as she has studied how to enact children's agency in the 'playworld' situations. Her research pointed out the complexity in pedagogical design that promotes children's agency.

Overall, the research on relational agency is wide and varied (see e.g. Edwards & D'Arcy, 2004; Edwards, 2005; 2011). Micro-level research on relational agency which emphasizes the interaction and negotiation between children, teachers and other ECE practitioners and the environment is still relatively scarce. I have addressed this less explored topic in this dissertation. In addition, this dissertation concentrates on the opportunities for people to

achieve agency as there is a strong emphasis on pedagogy which creates opportunities for agency in this study. As Biesta and Tedder (2006) argue, if agency has an educational aim, and achieving agency carries a desirable outcome, agency has a normative outcome. To understand agency more as an emancipation agency should be investigated as an empirical matter.

## 2.2.1 FINNISH EARLY YEARS PEDAGOGY

In Finland, there has been a long tradition of child-centred pedagogy, especially in ECE, which aims to value children's initiatives, ideas and opinions (Kumpulainen, 2018; FNAE, 2018; FNAE, 2016; see also Pramling Samuelsson & Asplund Carlsson, 2008; Van Oers & Duijkers, 2012). Initiatives and responses to them are culturally constructed as initiation defines the flow of interaction by introducing a new topic which opens new interactive situations or without changing the direction of the interactive situation and responses which can mediate the interactive situation or conclude it (Linell, 2009; Kajamaa & Hilli, 2014). Kronqvist (2004) has contributed to research on children's initiatives in children's autonomous play situations in ECE and she has especially concentrated on children's peer play during which a child inevitably acts as a competent agent. She observed children's autonomous play activities and studied children's initiatives and the peers' responses to them during the play activities and discovered various methods which children used in order to contribute by controlling, mediating or withdrawing from the situations. Hence play is not uncontrolled, because participants in play lead the play forward by negotiating, agreeing and resisting. Freedom of choice is also a concept which connects agency and play. Playfulness can be also a state of mind and not only manifested in actions. Any activity can obtain playful elements and also encourage people for agentic efforts.

Child-initiated pedagogy which positions children at the centre of the curriculum seeks to move away from adult-centred pedagogy (Lipponen & Kumpulainen, 2011). Children's initiatives, former experiences, child's natural way of acting, and exploring are emphasised in the current ECE and pre-primary curriculum (FNAE, 2018; FNAE, 2016a; see Kumpulainen & Sefton-Green, 2014; Sintonen et al., 2015).

The Finnish curricula, with descriptive content, offer autonomy and trust for teachers to design pedagogy as they desire. Teachers and other educational practitioners play an intrinsic role in creating and maintaining educational practices which promote and support children's agency (Rainio, 2008). Lipponen and Kumpulainen (2011) propose in their study that teachers' agentic experiences promote their understanding about the importance of promoting children's agency. The Finnish curricula clarify the distinct relation between experiencing and understanding, and the centrality of this

relationship to children's agency. The curriculum framework is therefore not a detailed document, but it offers agency for teachers and ECE practitioners to enact their own agency in how they support children's learning. This is a major factor leading to pedagogy which emphasizes agency. Hence, teachers need agentic experiences themselves to promote children's agency. However, agency-centred pedagogy is built on the notion that ECE practitioners initiate purposeful action in their pedagogical design. This pedagogical design, especially in early years education, is investigated through a relational agency perspective. As curriculum functions as one key element in delivering pedagogy which promotes agency, teachers' and other ECE practitioners' understanding of their importance in implementing the curriculum and paying attention to the interaction in their own classroom should be more widely acknowledged. Next, I will concentrate on the Finnish early years curricula and pedagogy and introduce the relevant parts of them concerning this dissertation.

### 3 THE FINNISH EARLY YEARS CURRICULA AND PEDAGOGY

Between 2012 and 2020, when I was undertaking my dissertation, ECE, pre-primary, and primary education underwent curriculum reform. The greatest changes were made in the ECE curriculum, which changed from being a directive document into a binding document. The change occurred from the development of legislation on ECE in 2017 when the new act for early childhood education and care was established. The previous act was passed in 1973. During the past few years, in ECE, the legislation of the subjective right of the child has varied between a shortened timeframe for participation and the right for each child to have a full day (Act, 2018; Kumpulainen, 2018; Ministry of Education and Culture, n.d.). Legislation for pre-primary education (which is mainly for six-year-old children) has undergone changes as well, changing from voluntary to compulsory participation (Act, 1998). When I first embarked on study for this dissertation, pre-primary education was a child's subjective right, similar to ECE, with a binding curriculum (FNAE, 2010), the attendance of children was quite high (Kumpulainen, 2018). While undertaking the study for this dissertation, pre-primary education ceased being a voluntary option for children and their families, to being mandatory for all children (Act, 1998). In Finland, primary education is compulsory (Act, 1998) and children's transition to primary education from pre-primary education occurs when they are seven years old for most. Both pre-primary education and primary education follow the Finnish National Core Curriculum (FNAE, 2016a; 2016b); moreover, in ECE overall, including pre-primary and primary education, the local curricula are based on the national curricula designed by the municipality. The national curricula guide how to create a local curriculum and require modes of action e.g. how parents are involved in the activities, how bullying will be prevented or how the pedagogical activities are documented and evaluated (FNAE, 2018).

The intrinsic value of childhood and children's active participation in matters which affect them has influenced the Finnish Core Curriculum for Early Childhood Education (2018), Finnish Core Curriculum for Pre-Primary Education (2016a), and Finnish Core Curriculum for Primary Education (2016b). Play and playful learning are emphasised and valued, particularly before primary education, and during early primary education. Playing enables children to act naturally, and through play children jointly make meaning of the environment in which they act (Kumpulainen & Sefton-Green, 2014; Sintonen et al., 2015). In addition, when playing, children assimilate and adapt in their existing social and cultural environments by interpreting and producing knowledge; in this manner, children develop their understanding of the world around them (Vygotsky, 1978; 1990). Playful activities,

particularly in ECE and pre-primary education must be both adult- and child-led. Imagination and creativity play an intrinsic role in playful pedagogy, which is encouraged in the early years' pedagogical activities (Møller, 2015; Sefton-Green et al., 2015). Overall, multiple ways of acting are emphasised across curricula (FNAE, 2014; 2016a; 2016b).

In the following sub-chapters, I discuss how agency is defined in the early years' curricula and pedagogy. I also shed light on multiliteracy as a new transversal competence area introduced by the latest curricula, with an emphasis on appreciating the multiple ways in which children can express themselves and make meaning in the early years' pedagogy. Two of my dissertation articles (Studies 2 and 3) stem from the Joy of Learning Multiliteracies (MOI) research and development program the aim of which is to study and develop multiliteracy pedagogy for children from 0-8 years (Kumpulainen, et al., 2018; Kumpulainen & Sefton-Green 2019).

### **3.1 AGENCY IN EARLY YEARS CURRICULA AND PEDAGOGY**

The Finnish early years curricula emphasise the recent research on childhood and education. The curricula include Vygotsky's (e.g. 1978) approach—for example, by emphasising the proximal zone of a child's development—as well as Piaget's (e.g. 1972) approach by referring to the ages of children in their learning and development. Finnish early years curricula are based on the notion of appreciating children's knowledge, opinions and views (FNAE, 2018; FNAE 2016a; FNAE, 2016b). 'Agency' as a word is referred to in ECE and pre-primary curricula, and the definitions are ambiguous. Overall, the definition of agency in the ECE and pre-primary curricula is relatively narrow and a certain sense undefined compared to that in primary education curriculum.

The ECE curriculum directs ECE teachers and other practitioners to create a learning environment which positions children as active agents: 'Knowledge and skills acquired in early childhood education and care strengthen children's participation and active agency in the society (FNAE, 2018, 14). According to the ECE curriculum, knowledge is the key for children to exercise their agency. Moreover, the curriculum connects agency to the concept of learning, which is also based on a view of the child's active agency (FNAE, 2018). In the national core curriculum for pre-primary education the word 'agency' is mentioned only once; part of the operational culture, similar to the ECE curriculum (FNAE, 2016a). The curriculum defines children as active actors and states that 'While decisions made by children and their actions are evaluated together, children are instructed to gradually carry shared responsibilities. This creates experiences of participation and agency in children' (2016a, 47). The national core curriculum for basic education (2016b) defines agency in

several parts of the document and is acknowledged in a much broader sense by defining agency more thoroughly. In national core curriculum for basic education, active agency as an underlying value of each child and as a transversal competence resonates with both ECE and pre-primary education core curricula. Further, mentions in subjects such as visual arts for first and second graders strengthen the presence of the concept. However, the definitions in core curriculum for basic education vary in certain parts of the text. First, agency is defined as something to possess: '[education] promotes understanding of cultural diversity and helps the pupils to perceive cultures as a progression of the past, the present and the future where everyone can *have* agency' (FNAE, 2016b, 18); then, it is defined as something to practice: 'with the aim of...reinforcing the application of knowledge and skills in practice and *practising* agency that is consistent with a sustainable way of living' (FNAE, 2016b, 32). These definitions have an effect on how teachers view agency and how they aim to design pedagogy which promote agency.

### **3.2 MULTILITERACY ENHANCING CHILDREN'S AGENCY AND PEDAGOGICAL PRACTICE**

The current Finnish early years core curricula have adopted multiliteracy as one of the transversal competencies. In the ECE curriculum, multiliteracy shares a chapter with competence in information and communication technology, whereas in pre-primary and early primary education curricula, multiliteracy is defined as one competency among other transversal competences (FNAE, 2018; FNAE 2016a; FNAE, 2016b). As a term, multiliteracy came into Finnish curricula without a significant connection to earlier curricula, even though there has been a long tradition of valuing literacy skills, in Finland (Kumpulainen & Sefton-Green, 2019).

Originally, the pedagogy of multiliteracy derives from the New London Group's (1996) publication called 'A pedagogy of multiliteracies: Designing social futures', which acknowledges the multifaceted society and seeks new ways of conceptualising literacy. Drawing from research (e.g. New London Group, 1996), Finnish early years' curricula (FNAE, 2016a; 2016b; 2018) and the MOI research program (Kumpulainen et al., 2018), a pedagogy of multiliteracy from the perspective of early years learning, comprise multiple ways of reading, interpreting, and producing various texts (such as traditional texts, pictures, or signs)—that is, multimodal ways to engage with a broad range of texts (see Bezemer & Kress, 2016). Thus, multimodality is at the centre of multiliteracy pedagogy of young learners, which promotes children's agency by offering various ways to engage with a range of texts. Hence, multiliteracy promotes children's opportunities to experience, participate, and influence the world around them. It is necessary to understand multiliteracy

as a competency—not as merely one literacy skill or multiple literacy skills but as ‘interfaces, interactional processes, and social practices’ which provide abilities to dive into the constructions and implications of texts (Kumpulainen et al., 2018). As part of transversal competencies, multiliteracy is aimed at broadening children’s understanding of multiple texts and text environments. In Finland, promoting multiliteracy is a pedagogical question throughout the curricula (FNAE, 2016a; 2016b; 2018).

## 4 THE RESEARCH DESIGN

In this chapter, I introduce the objectives of my dissertation and the research questions related to these objectives. Then, I discuss the three research settings of this dissertation and describe the data collection process used in each sub-study.

Objective 1: To investigate the sociocultural resources which mediate children's sense of agency and regarding children's perspectives on their own agency.

*Research question 1: How do children narrate the sociocultural resources which mediate their sense of agency in early years learning contexts?*

*Research question 2: How do children narrate their sense of agency across space and time within the context of preschool and first grade settings?*

Objective 2: To create an understanding about teachers' agency when they design pedagogy.

*Research question 3: How is teachers' agency manifested when learning materials which aim to promote multiliteracy learning are adapted in the local context?*

Objective 3: To understand how children's agency is promoted and hindered in ECE, and how children take the initiative and ECE practitioners respond to them.

*Research question 4: How do the interactional dynamics between children's initiatives and ECE practitioners' responses support or hinder children's agency?*

To achieve the objects of this dissertation, three separate research designs were created. As a common methodological approach, every case study shares the participatory research grounding based on the sociocultural approach. This chapter provides narratives of the three research designs, beginning with descriptions of the three different research sites, including data collection and descriptions of the participants of the research. The focus in this dissertation is on children aged 5-8 years and teachers. In Finland, ECE teachers instruct children from 0-6 years including pre-primary education and in addition, the primary teachers are also qualified to teach in pre-primary education. In

Finnish ECE, teachers are qualified teachers who have completed a university-level bachelor degree. In pre-primary education, ECE teachers and primary teachers with university level education are considered to be qualified teachers (Act 540/2018; Kumpulainen, 2018).

The research setting in this dissertation consists of early years educational contexts, as I described earlier. I conducted research in ECE and pre-primary education in Finland, which was organised in kindergartens, and primary education in schools, respectively. All the research data in this dissertation were collected from public ECE centres and public schools. Study 1 concentrated on pre-primary and early primary education, Study 2 focused on ECE and pre-primary education, and Study 3 concentrated on ECE. As mentioned previously, in all these educational contexts, teachers have pedagogical freedom and autonomy to design pedagogy and to teach in the manner that they think is best-suited to the classroom and group of children. Therefore, the curriculum only functions to provide gentle guidance in the design and teaching. Further, I collected the research data for the period between 2012 and 2018 which covers the period of curriculum change.

#### **4.1 THE TRANSITION FROM PRE-PRIMARY TO PRIMARY EDUCATION**

In Study 1, the focus was on children in one pre-primary education classroom and on the same children in three primary education classrooms to which they transferred. In this study, pre-primary education was provided in a common ECE centre in the city of Helsinki. During the study, children transferred to two other schools in the city of Helsinki. It was at these research sites that I collected the research data. The pre-primary education, in which I worked as a pre-primary teacher at the time of the data collection, was part of an ECE group with 28 children in the aged between 3 and 6 years, of which 16 children were part of the pre-primary education group. These 16 children attended 4 hours of pre-primary education per day; they formed their own group. In primary school each class included around 20 children. Five children from the pre-primary education group participated in this study. Anna, Henri, Laura, Leo, and Emma (pseudonyms) were 6 years of age when the research data were collected from the pre-primary education and 7 years of age when the research data were collected in early primary education. Children were selected from the pre-primary classroom in accordance with their willingness to participate in the study in pre-primary education. Further, guardians who expressed their willingness to participate over a longer period of data collection was another criterion for selecting the children.

The physical environment varied in pre-primary and in primary education classrooms. In pre-primary education, children had three rooms to use daily,

out of which one specific room was used prior to pre-primary education. Children could use other rooms in the ECE centre quite freely and they had the opportunity to visit other groups' rooms during the days. Children stored their workbooks and other personal educational materials in individual drawers, and other individual belongings in their lockers in the corridor. In all three primary education classrooms to which the children transferred, children had their own desks in which they stored their own materials, including books, worksheets, and pencils. In all three classrooms, teachers' tables were located at the front of the classroom; the classroom also included a blackboard and some educational technology such as a computer.

At the beginning of the data collection phase, I introduced the children to the participatory visual narrative inquiry method, which I used in the data collection. Children practised taking photos and familiarised themselves with the cameras which they were going to use for the data collection. I also informed the children about the study and explained the importance of taking photos of everything they were interested in. After the children knew how to use the cameras independently, they began taking the photos for the study. The data were collected with the children with the aim of discovering their sense of agency. Children took photos following my instructions in the areas of 'Can and be able to', 'Feel and want', and 'Participate and influence', which were based on the modalities of agency (Jyrkämä, 2008). The instructions were semi-open and included three steps. Children were asked to take photos in the following order of things 1) things they were able to do and allowed to do, 2) things that were linked to their feelings and wants, and 3) things that they could and could not participate in and influence. Further, children were asked to follow this order to allow them to go back to the previous steps. I was near the children when they took the photos and they were allowed to ask questions if they forgot the instructions, had problems in using the cameras, or had any other questions. Children were free to take as many photos they wanted and for as long as they wanted, although all the children took their photos during one day in both educational contexts. In the pre-primary education group, children took photos all over the ECE centre and in schools they took photos mainly in their own classroom or in the corridor or hallway next to the classroom where they kept their outdoor clothes during schooldays. One child took one photo from the school yard through the window.

Then, I conducted individual interview sessions with every child. The interviews were open-ended conversations based on their visual narrations of their sense of agency. Thus, children communicated through photos they took of things around them in their respective educational contexts. The interviews were conducted on the same day or one day after the photographs were taken. In pre-primary education, the interviews were conducted during the day in a quiet room and in schools, the interviews were conducted after the school day in an empty classroom. At the beginning of the interview, each child was asked to go through the photos they had taken and to ensure that they were satisfied with them. Children showed ownership of their photos by deleting all photos

that they did not find any meaning in and wanted to exclude them from the research.

I felt that it was important to conduct the interview fairly soon after the photo session, although I followed children and took notes when they shared meanings of the photos during the photo session. Children's interviews were essential for revealing the meaning underlying each photo (see Pink, 2007). Children explained freely the meanings and details in the photos and the connections which they had made while taking the photos. The researcher's role was to listen, and only ask clarifying questions or support the children's narratives. In addition to supporting the children's narratives, I used the notes which I made while shadowing the children. The notes helped me to obtain an overall picture of the kind of photos children had taken to respond to the various modalities. Therefore, were able to help children to remember the meanings of their photos, although the children could ultimately decide what the photo illustrated. The interviews were audio recorded and finally transcribed.

## **4.2 ECE AND PRE-PRIMARY EDUCATION TEACHERS IMPLEMENTING THE NEW CURRICULA**

In Study 2, the focus was on two ECE groups and two pre-primary education groups, particularly on their teachers Saara, Helena, Alma and Susanna (pseudonyms). Three of the teachers worked in an ECE centre and one teacher worked in a pre-primary education classroom in an ECE centre which operated in the same premises as a school. Teachers were selected for the study because of their voluntary use of pedagogical material called *Whisper of the Spirit* (Erfving et al., 2018) in their pedagogy design and in teaching. The material in the form of activity cards had been developed in cooperation between university researchers and artists and it offered tools to enhance multiliteracy pedagogy, strengthen children's relationship with nature, and provide narrations on ancient Finnish myths. The cards encourage teachers to design multimodal pedagogical activities by sensing nature with arts or initiate a pretend play. The material is available to teachers to use as a whole, partially, or just as a springboard to further activities. Moreover, the cards are freely downloadable from the internet.

In the study, my co-researchers and I collected the data after the teachers had designed, conducted, and followed through the project based on *Whisper of the Spirit*. The teachers were interviewed with open-ended interviews using the visual narrative inquiry approach (Bach, 2008). In the voluntary interviews the teachers made meaning through children's outputs as visual narrations that supported the interview, their own design plans, and memorising the project. The interviews were individual and took place in each

teacher's classroom, except one interview which was conducted via a stream video. Apart from this telephonic interview, the researchers and the teachers met face-to-face and used a list of relevant themes and questions (see Appendix 2) to go through during the interviews. The list helped us to concentrate on the teachers' elaboration and we were able to concentrate more on asking complementary questions during the interviews (see Galletta, 2012.) In the streamed interview, the teacher used visual material during the narration with the help of an application that both the researcher and the teacher had access to simultaneously. In all interviews, our aim was to guide the interview with questions and simultaneously listen to and to observe what the teachers narrated using visual elements. The interviews were filmed, or audio recorded if the teacher did not want to be filmed. Lastly, our research assistants Jenny Byman, Jenny Renlund, and Carolina Tallgren transcribed the interviews.

Each participant was visited once, and the interviewer reminded the interviewee to explain the whole project from the beginning to the end. The participants had an opportunity to add anything which came to their minds during the interview and also virtually after the face-to-face interview. These open-ended interviews had elements from ethnography as the researcher made field notes and observed the environments, although the researchers met the participants only once. The virtual connection with every participant lasted a longer period and through the connection the researchers had the possibility to ask further questions and the participants could freely supplement their narrations.

### **4.3 INTERACTIONS BETWEEN CHILDREN AND ECE PRACTITIONERS IN THE ECE CENTRE**

The focus in Study 3 was on children's and ECE practitioners' interaction and how children's initiatives and ECE practitioners' responses on them promoted or hindered children's agency. The research site was a public Finnish ECE centre in the southern part of Finland with around 80 children aged from 0-5 years. The neighbourhood is approximately 30% multicultural (Mäki & Vuori, 2019). The ECE centre consisted of four groups of about 20 children each. From one of the groups, eight children (Emma, Joe, Paul, Leo, Max, Samuel, Vera, and Violet (pseudonyms)) and two ECE practitioners - Maria and Linda (pseudonyms) participated in this study. The children were all five years of age and formed a group called 'the five-year-olds' (*viskarit* in Finnish). The physical environment was a typical Finnish ECE centre with its activity and opening times from about 7 AM to 6 PM. The everyday activities indoors and outdoors were planned in accordance with the ECE centre's plan of action which was based on the municipality's curriculum. The municipality's

curriculum was derived from the national early childhood education and care curriculum (Kumpulainen, 2018). ECE practitioners and children plan and lead the activities in turns, also involving parents in the design process. Meals and rest times were included in their days. The ‘five-years olds’ and the ECE practitioners executed a project called *The Spirit*, based on *Whisper of the Spirit* material (Erfwing, et al., 2018). The aim with that material was to enhance children’s relationship to nature and brings forward narrations about Finnish myths. I described the material in greater detail in Study 2.

In this study, I collected the data with the ECE practitioners using participatory research methods (see e.g. Clark, 2011). We filmed 150 hours of research data during the project. I used ECE practitioners’ interviews, notes, and observations as additional data. The aims of the project were ‘to promote the development of multiliteracy and arouse children’s interest in nature and Finnish mythology’ which was set forth by the ECE practitioners. The activities were mainly adult-initiated activities, which included discussing the topic, reading books about spirits and gnomes, and discussing the stories, reflecting on the project and previous experiences through words and photos, moulding the spirits for animations from modelling clay, crafting homes for the spirits from cardboard boxes and materials from nature, and creating animations. According to Maria, the ECE practitioner, the aim of the project was also to provide children with opportunities for creativity by enabling them to express an outlet for their own interests in the activities.

## 5 METHODOLOGY AND METHODS

In this qualitative dissertation, I have concentrated on investigating agency among children and teachers in early years pedagogy. I employed visual and participatory methods to examine agency in various settings from the perspective of children's sense of agency, teachers' agency, and children's and ECE practitioners' interaction. In the sociocultural theory I applied, knowledge is built in the interaction between people and the environment with cultural tools. The information is found in the participants' oral narrations, visual narrations, and visual narrative methods with ethnographic notion offered an opportunity to study children's and teachers' perspectives. With participatory methods, my aim was to achieve knowledge with the participants and reach knowledge with them not from them. In addition, in considering the nature of relational agency as manifesting itself in interaction between people and their environment, studying interaction was a focus in this dissertation.

**Table 1** *Methods, amount of data and data analysis*

<b>Studies of the dissertation</b>	<b>Methods</b>	<b>Types of data</b>	<b>Analysis</b>
Study 1	Visual narrative inquiry based on visual ethnography	Photographs and photo-reflection	Visual ethnography and narrative studies of identity
Study 2	Open-ended interviews and guided approach	Video and audio	Thematic analysis
Study 3	Video-ethnography	Main data: video and observational notes Secondary data: teacher's plans, interviews, still photos of the activities	Interaction Analysis method

Next, I will discuss the methodological decisions of the sub-studies and introduce the methods. I will also reflect the ethical concerns and limitations.

## 5.1 PARTICIPATORY RESEARCH

Participatory research has increasingly aroused interest among researchers, particularly when conducting research with young children. The contemporary research on children and childhood positioning children at the centre (Prout & James, 2017) in the field of educational research has offered options for researchers to reconsider and develop methodological approaches. In my dissertation, I used participatory methods to gain opportunities to investigate the perspectives of both children and adults and aimed to gain deeper information along with them. I aimed to conduct research with children and adults in the context of the early years learning to reveal new viewpoints and knowledge. In addition, my aim was to place participants, particularly children, as active participants of the research process rather than as the subjects of research (Christensen & James, 2017). This was done particularly in Study 1. Further, I found it beneficial to conduct participatory research with teachers, because my aim was to understand their meaning-making in Study 2. In Study 3, the ECE practitioners collected the data with us and through that we had the opportunity to dig deeper in their everyday practices in the ECE centre.

Participatory research offers a chance to position children and adults as co-researchers because they are not only the object of the research but also co-researchers with the researchers in collecting and producing data. Changing the understanding from ‘doing research *from* participants’ to ‘doing research *with* participants’ is based on the notion of children having an important voice that researchers should listen to (see e.g. Thompson, 2007; Clark, 2011). However, within academia, there is scepticism regarding whether researchers and participants can be seen as being equal to each other (Thompson, 2007). The same discussion can be found in the studies on childhood, as I have previously described, in which the discussion focuses on the relationship between a child and an adult (see e.g. Rainio, 2010) These power issues are acknowledged in this dissertation, but rather than making a major contribution to them in the sub-studies, in this dissertation, the benefits were highlighted when collecting data using participatory methods.

Participatory methods enable the attainment of knowledge which would otherwise be difficult to achieve without the active participation of participants. When concentrating on the knowledge that can be received from a child through an informant—for example, a child’s parents or teachers—it is possible that the information that could be obtained through direct interaction is missing (Einarsdóttir, 2007), as the knowledge comes straight from the child. Children, as individuals, deserve to be taken seriously and to be heard as much in the field of research as in any setting, and it is important to perceive children as knowledge builders in a similar manner to youth and adults. As informants, children may require researchers to think and create methods for

children of various ages and in different development stages so that they can express themselves (Punch, 2002).

However, in this dissertation the participatory research does not concern only children, but early years practitioners as well. Approaching participatory research as concentrating on social and cultural environments (Punch, 2002), as proposed in this dissertation, the study concentrated on emphasising the participatory method as a meaningful means for research agency in the early years learning context with a sociocultural approach. Hence, research *with* children and adults in this dissertation approached and emphasised a person-centred approach (Clark, 2011), when the focus is not only on participatory research with children but also with ECE and pre-primary education practitioners.

## 5.2 VISUAL ETHNOGRAPHY

In this dissertation, I have used visual ethnography as a research method; in the three studies, the method appears through a process of visual narrative inquiry and video-ethnography. In ethnography, images are an important way to give rise to conversations and to evoke memories, and conversations may support images. Visuals are growing in popularity in ethnographic research, and with the newest technology, images are relatively easy to capture. Moreover, it has become easier to deliver the entire research process utilising new technological devices. (Flewitt, 2006; Pink, 2007). In particular, I am of the opinion that in conducting research with young children, images (and videos) are better able to mediate children's meaning-making and offer an excellent means to understand children's perspectives. In Study 1, visual narrative inquiry offered an opportunity to go beyond the text and the narration with the children. In Study 2, the visuals in the interviews with the teachers helped to keep the focus on the ongoing discussion and to propose questions derived from the teachers' narrations about the visuals. In Study 3, video-ethnography offered an opportunity to make sense of the activities in the ECE classroom and see all the various interactions between the children and the ECE practitioners, which—because of their diversity—would have been difficult to catch merely by observing. As Flewitt (2006) argues, videoing enables capturing non-verbal meanings, in addition to the verbal meanings in children's narratives. The interaction between people is not only verbal but combinations of verbal meaning-making and various other modes, such as gestures and physical movements. In young children, verbal meaning-making can be even minor compared to other ways of making meaning. (Flewitt, 2006)

Visual ethnography as a method is criticised for its lack of validity, although in methodological discussions, ethnography has confronted suspicions regarding whether ethnographers are ever able to deliver the entire truth and not merely the constructed truth. However, as the researcher makes

interpretations through their own beliefs and assumptions, there is always a risk of misinterpretations. It is argued that a specific research process or the research presented can never be completely objective, that is, ethnography can provide only a constructed truth in the field of research (Pink, 2007). Nevertheless, in this dissertation, the ethnographically constructed truth is extremely important and reveals the individual perceptions of agency of not only children and teachers of agency but also experiences of how cultural, social, and historical contexts are constructed, expressed and shaped in early years educational contexts (McAdams, Josselson & Lieblich, 2006). In particular, in Studies 2 and 3, I have used videos, and videos enable one to grasp so much even in a short time.

### **5.3 VISUAL NARRATIVE INQUIRY**

As a method, visual narrative inquiry offers the chance for a researcher and participants to reflect together on how the participants make meaning of how they experience themselves and the environment in which they act (Bach, 2008). In this dissertation, I used visual materials such as children's visual images and children's outputs presented by their teachers, to mediate the participants' narration of their experiences that they are willing to address. The visual materials are a medium between the participants and they enabled me to understand the narrative constructions of both children and adults better. As mentioned, the tools to enable the visual narratives used in this research are photo images and children's outputs. Digital devices offer a wide range of options to capture moments in people's lives (Flewitt, 2006). In this dissertation, I used digital cameras, smartphones, and tablets to collect the data.

Reflection with a narrative element, hence images and children's outputs in this dissertation, enable information to be obtained from children and adults regarding their insights and reflections. Conducting visual narrative research enables one to concentrate on whose voice is heard, and how it contributes to building an individual's identity. I argue that the narrative process with visual artefacts is a dynamic process in which an individual is able to construct and reconstruct their identity by discussing the present, reflecting on the past, and orienting to the future (see Hand, 2006; Bach, 2007). The conversations, or interviews as they are conceptualised in this dissertation, enable children and adults to describe their experiences and make sense of them with the help of visual artefacts (see also Hilppö, Lipponen, Kumpulainen & Rajala, 2016).

Further, the visual narrative approach enables the researcher to approach individual observations. There is a contradiction in the discussion on whether research is able to bring the participants' reflections forward or does the

researcher tend to prevent this from happening (Roberts, 2017; Christensen & James, 2017). When conducting research, how the researcher represents the research and its purposes as well as the attitude the researcher adopts to the research participants are all important. My aim in this dissertation has been to use research to find ways to understand how children and adults can make meaning without any boundaries of their experiences and matters which are important to them. Visual narrative inquiry offers a tool to achieve this goal and provides an opportunity to deepen the reflections, particularly those relating to children who may be silent observers (Bach, 2008).

## 5.4 OPEN-ENDED INTERVIEWS

In addition, I chose to approach agency with a combination of open-ended interviews and a guided approach (Patton, 2015), which functioned as a purposeful means to dig deeper into a research participant's sense-making. In this sociocultural research, the semi-structured open-ended interviews offered a means to discover the participants' social and cultural worlds through their personal narrations (Legard, Keegan & Ward, 2003). As Patton (1990) explains, a qualitative interview is mostly conducted through informal conversational interviews, in which the interviewer has advance knowledge of the research setting. The information can be collected in the form of observations, or as in this study, as knowledge of the pedagogical material. The research questions may vary between the interviewees. I created an interview guide (see appendix 2) with my co-researchers which guided the conversations during the interviews.

The process of an open-ended interview offers options for a researcher to have a thorough conversation with an interviewee. The researcher should create a comfortable atmosphere for the interview and aim to establish mutual trust. The interviewee's secure feeling will more likely provide broader information. In addition, the interviewee should not feel restricted. On the contrary, it is beneficial if the subject of the interview is familiar to the interviewee and motivated to share their thoughts. Hence, an interviewer should refrain from being the expert on the issue and let the interviewee openly shares his/her thoughts. Open interview questions provide freedom to an interviewee to address the important issues of which the interviewer is interested to discover (Legard, Keegan & Ward, 2003).

When conducting the interviews, the challenge in the informal conversation interviews is the individualistic manner in which people may behave in interviews. Moreover, the answers of the interviewees may vary because of their different personalities. With open-ended interviews the situations vary when in some interviews there was no opportunity to ask many additional questions, while in some interviews an interviewee may answer

with brevity. The researcher's role is to maintain the conversation with questions which are formed in the interview process. Therefore, an interviewee is required to be engaged during the entire conversation so that an interviewer is able to ask supplementary questions from the interviewee's ongoing narration (Patton, 1990; Legard, Keegan & Ward, 2003).

## **5.5 DATA-ANALYSIS PROCEDURES**

The analysis in Study 1 was grounded on narrative analysis based on the ethnography (Bach, 2008; Pink, 2007) and narrative analysis of identity (McAdams, Josselson & Lieblich, 2006) which also resonated in the analysis in Study 2. In Study 1, the analysis concentrated on visual narration, that is, the children's photos and their narrations of them. The aim of the analysis was to take note of the sociocultural meanings which children described, with a specific focus on the modalities of agency. Pink (2013) describes that the process of collecting data and the process of analysis in an ethnographic study are not separate processes but are related in the overall study process. In particular, in Study 1, the data collection followed these steps, as the analysis was conducted with children by listening to their narrations regarding the photos. As narrative analysis of identity which emphasises a life story about the past but also orients to the future, we discovered cultural meanings underlying the photos which the children had taken. Through this method, I was able to analyse children's lives and their social and cultural relationships with people and their environments; the children were able to narrate about themselves and their lifeworlds (see McAdams, 2008). These methods added a touch of participatory research to the analysis, as children analysed their own photos.

In Study 2, the analysis was conducted in three steps through thematic analysis from teachers' interviews and narrations. First, familiarising with the transcribed audio data and watching the video data; second, identifying parallel themes from the data; and, third, identifying how agency manifested itself in the teachers' narrations. The analysis leaned on the narrations of teachers as selves who narrated their experiences using outputs created by children in their pre-primary and ECE classrooms as visuals (see McAdams, Josselson & Lieblich, 2006). The visuals delivered the teachers' descriptions and enriched the narrations. The analysis proceeded following thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006) in the following three steps. First, my co-researchers and I concentrated on the teachers' individual narrations, transcribed them, and read the transcriptions as individual narrations. Second, we brought all the narrations together and created intersecting themes from the narrations. Third, we indicated the episodes in which agency was manifesting itself.

In Study 3, the analysis followed the principles of interaction analysis (Jordan & Henderson, 1995) in which my co-researchers and I approached the data abductively. Through Interactional Analysis we were able to analyse interaction, that is mainly words in our study—as well as non-verbal interaction such as gestures, facial expressions, and bodily movements. The analysis focused on the actors who interpret and act in the social and material world. Interaction Analysis is mainly conducted through digital devices (Jordan & Henderson, 1995). In our study, the main data were video data, which I video-recorded along with the ECE practitioners, by taking turns: a few activities were video-recorded by me and a few activities were video-recorded by the ECE practitioners. The analysis was data-driven and there were four steps of analysis in the process between data and theory (see Van Maanen, Sørensen & Terence, 2007) First, we coded the episodes with the MAXQDA program from 150 hours of recordings, in which the children took a verbal or non-verbal initiative and to which the ECE practitioners responded. Second, we depicted the coded initiatives and responses by following and applying Kajamaa and Hilli's (2014) typology. Third, we created a typology from the research context of this study to describe the children's initiatives and the ECE practitioners' responses.

## 5.6 ETHICAL CONCERNS AND LIMITATIONS

As the research on childhood has taken decisive steps on positioning children as knowledge producers and the rapid development of digital devices for data collection and analysis, ethical concerns must be followed in this development. It is important to take account of ethical considerations; thus, the constant and rapid development of digital devices opens new approaches to record and store data. On the other hand, these steps forward enable the capturing of children's voices through multimodal means; on the other hand, these steps must encourage researchers to acknowledge ethics from new viewpoints (see Flewitt, 2020). In this dissertation, I followed the ethical standards related to participants' dignity and autonomy laid down by the Finnish National Board on Research Integrity (2019). This is obligatory but as Flewitt (2020) reflects, it is not enough. I have duly considered the necessary research ethic from the first point in this dissertation to the last period of this summary.

During this dissertation work, I obtained permission for the various processes involved in this work. For all the three studies, I sought research permission from the City of Helsinki. The recruitment for the studies was done by a researcher visiting the field and informing the children and/or teachers and other practitioners about the study. Written research permission was sought from the children and their guardians, teachers, and other ECE staff. I considered it important to seek verbal permission from the children, and I

answered the children's questions regarding the study before and during the data collection process (see Danby & Farrell, 2004). During the three sub-studies, I collected a great deal of data, mainly in a digital form. The data were safely stored in a digital format in a single location protected with a password, following the guidelines of the Finnish National Board on Research Integrity (Finnish National Board on Research Integrity, 2019; see also Flewitt, 2020).

As the Finnish National Board on Research Integrity (2019) requires, research which focuses on minors, in this case children, must follow specific considerations on research ethics. I approached my research with children in alignment with the new paradigm of childhood studies (see e.g. Christensen & James, 2000) and emphasised the children's right to participate (Dockett, Einarsdóttir, & Perry, 2009). In my research work, it has been the principal thought throughout the dissertation process that children, regardless of their background, have the full right to participate in the research, as they are active knowledge producers. In addition, the variety of methods which I employed in this dissertation has ensured that a variety of people were able to participate regardless of their background or status in the society. I have also acknowledged the idea of respecting the participants' voices in researching children and adults. In accordance with this, I emphasised the participants' right to voluntary participation and also their right to refuse or partially refuse their participation if needed at any time during the research process (see Danby & Farrell, 2004). Because of the wishes of the participants, we included audio data in Study 2, even though we had originally planned to collect only visual data in the study.

When I conducted the participatory field work, I became aware that not just children but also their parents, were eager to participate in the research. Moreover, the teachers and other ECE practitioners eagerly shared their work and thoughts. I felt the responsibility to share, in as much detail as possible all information regarding the sub-studies (see e.g. Thomson, 2007) and explain the implication of participation during the research process and in the future (Flewitt, 2020). In particular, in Study 1, I played a dual role as the children's teacher and as a researcher, which enabled the creation of close relationships with the children and their families. This provided me the opportunity to meet with the children and their guardians and to answer their questions over a long period of time before, during, and after the data collection. Further, by providing contact details in the sub-studies, I aimed to offer the opportunity to remain in touch even after the data collection process was over. In addition, the research respects the privacy of both children and teachers, as I have mentioned previously; thus, the names used in the study are pseudonyms and the ECE centres, schools or the municipalities cannot be traced from the study reports.

With this dissertation, I confronted a few methodological challenges which resulted in limiting the research process. In ethnographic research, the researcher's role is something to consider; the active presence of the researcher may lead to their contribution in the data. Although a researcher

must aim to remain away from the centre of activity and avoid participating in the field, their presence itself creates interactions with the participants. In Study 3, children were interested in the camera which I used to collect the data. We had many discussions with the children about the camera. They also wanted to see how they look in the videos. These activities took our time away from video recording, but I felt it was the children's right to see the videos and have the discussions. In addition, my dual role in Study 1 as the researcher and the participants' teacher, may have caused limitations in the children's narrations, as the role of authority which I had as a teacher may have influenced the children's answers. It is possible that the children may have said what they believed I would have wanted to hear, instead of describing how they actually thought and felt. However, I sought to minimize this effect by having discussions with the children on their freedom to express themselves, and consciously refrained from making any value judgements regarding their photos or their narrations.

The interviews in Studies 1 and 2 offered a few challenges during the data collection phase. While it is acknowledged that a researcher makes small decisions throughout the study process which ultimately function to guide the direction of the study process (Roulston & Choi, 2018), in Study 2 we acknowledged that when all three authors conducted the interviews, the decisions on how to conduct the interview and which focus questions each of us would propose provided challenges. The variety of interview data was evident when we analysed the interviews. In addition, we did not have the opportunity to raise additional questions to all the participants. Although we felt that the visualisations enriched the interviews, interpreting audio and visual is different (see e.g. Pink, 2013). In Study 1, children provided the analysis of the visuals in co-operation with me, but in study 2, the researchers conducted the analysis. We strove to eliminate a misanalysis by handling the video as a supplementary resource alongside the audio.

When using dynamic texts, such as video particularly in Study 3, as Flewitt (2006) claims, researchers must acknowledge that the interpretation of the text carries the burden of subjective interpretation. With reflexive stance, the subjectivity is manageable. When I analysed the data with Interaction analysis (Jordan & Henderson, 2005) we had multiple conversations about the videos and the analysis of the data as it is part of the analysis process. In addition, I aimed to manage subjective and bias interpretations using supplementary data to support my analysis and doing notes during the field work (see Flewitt, 2006).

In order to ensure the reliability of the research, or trustworthiness as some qualitative researchers prefer to refer to it as (Lewis & Ritchie, 2003), the research data were collected over a period of time. During the ethnographic fieldwork and open-ended interviews, I had time to observe the situations and ask for clarifications if needed. Moreover, ethnographic data were obtained through descriptions I provided in previous chapters and in the original publications (see Harrison, 2018).

## 6 EMPIRICAL STUDIES

This dissertation comprises three sub-studies. This chapter introduces these studies by presenting the objectives and describing the results. The original publications present the results in their entirety.

### 6.1 STUDY 1

Objective 1 : To investigate the sociocultural resources which mediate children's sense of agency and regarding children's perspectives on their own agency.

*Research question 1: How do children narrate their sense of agency across space and time within the context of preschool and first grade settings?*

*Research question 2: What are the sociocultural resources that children identify as mediating their sense of agency in the two educational settings?*

This case study focused on children's sense of agency. In this study, I investigated how sociocultural conditions and resources affect children's sense of agency in transition from pre-primary education to primary education in first grade. I wanted to discover how relational contexts, symbolic systems and institutional practices mediate children's agency, as well as to capture the sociocultural dynamics of how agency emerges and is constituted in children's lives across pre-primary and primary education contexts. I was also interested in the temporality of children's agency, and how the past, the present, and the future mediate children's agency hence, how children orientated their actions towards the past, the present, and the future. In this study I was particularly interested in children's sense of agency, that is, children's interpretations and viewpoints. In order to achieve these objectives, I formulated the following research questions: 1) How do children narrate their sense of agency across space and time within the context of preschool and first grade settings? 2) What are the sociocultural resources that children identify as mediating their sense of agency in the two educational settings?

#### 6.1.1 STUDY

My study on children's sense of agency was informed by Jyrkämä's (2008) conceptualisation of modalities of agency, which comprises six modalities.

These modalities include being able to do something; knowing how to do something; wanting to do something; having the opportunity to do something; having to do something; and feeling, experiencing, and appreciating something. Through these modalities, I investigated how the children's sense of agency interact with the learning environment in pre-primary education and in primary education in the first grade, and how children's thoughts, ideas, and ambitions were connected to these educational settings.

In this visual-narrative study, I used participatory methods with my co-researcher when I conducted the research. I invited children to participate in the study in order to document their sense of agency. The aim was not to analyse any standardised educational achievements of a particular age group, but to listen to and understand how children document and explain their sense of agency, how they connect it with the environment they experience, and how the social and cultural, and temporal meanings are expressed in their narrations. I wanted to respect the children's own voices and truly listen to them when they narrated their sense of agency aligned with the contemporary approach of children's rights and especially in Western countries, their position in the society (United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child 1989, Einarsdóttir, 2007).

This study was situated in Finnish pre-primary and primary education, that is in pre-school and in school. The pre-primary and primary education were run by the City of Helsinki, the capital city of Finland. After a year in the pre-primary education the children who took part in the research transferred to two different schools in the same area of Helsinki.

The analysis method followed visual ethnography (Bach, 2008; Pink, 2007). With the children, we analysed the photos which children took from the modalities of sense of agency and the narrations which they provided regarding the photo in individual interviews. In order to obtain a thorough understanding about the meaning underlying the photo we could not separate the photo from the child's narration of the photo or analyse the photo and the narration separately. Our aim was to engage in the photo and the narration behind it to understand how the photo and the narration were connected in the social, cultural, and institutional context. (Bruner, 1987.)

## 6.1.2 RESULTS

The results of this study showed how the cultural resources mediated children's photos and narrations. I divided the cultural resources into four groups: people, artefacts, activity and interaction, and environmental rules and goals. People included friends, teachers, and other education practitioners. Material artefacts included, for example, drawings on the wall, books, pencils or other learning materials, board games, and physical spaces. Rules and goals emerged in children's narrations when they described what they are allowed to do or no, or what they are able or are not able to do because

of their understanding of cultural expectations or their comprehension of their own capabilities. Moreover, descriptions of schedules and timetables during the days included in this group. These four categories had an effect on children's sense of agency. Everyone experienced their agency individually, although I also found similarities in their narrations. I also found continuity and discontinuity between past, present, and future in children's narrations of their sense of agency. It must be noted that in pre-primary education, children narrated mostly in present tense by identifying what they wanted to do when in school; the sociocultural understanding of the context of learning was evident in children's narrations on learning.

Overall, this study shed light on children's sense making of their agentic experiences in pre-primary and first grade. This information is important not only for researchers but also teachers in supporting children's educational engagement and their transition from pre-primary education to primary education. Importantly, I could find only a few instances in children's visual narrations of their actual agency, when they could genuinely transform their position and to take initiatives, which would make a difference in the activity context; research has proven this to be focal for promoting children's active agency (Edwards & D'Arcy, 2004, Stetsenko, 2013). As a methodological contribution, this study shows how visual narrative inquiry offers a means to listen to children in transition from pre-primary education to first grade and as a method to conduct co-research with children.

The results of Study 1 contribute to research knowledge on children's sense of agency in two educational contexts, pre-primary education and first grade of primary education as well as the transition between these two contexts. With regard to temporal continuity and discontinuity, the children's visual narrations included temporality, that is, narrations about the past, present and future, across contexts in pre-primary education and first grade.

In both activity contexts children described past, present and future in various visual narrations. In the pre-primary education setting, the narrations in the present tense included numerous activities such as drawing, climbing, and reaching whereas in the first-grade setting, the narrations included learning activities. As an example, from visual narrations, I provide a short insight on Laura. Laura took a few photos of places she could reach, including a locker and a light switch in the pre-primary classroom. Her visual narration included naming the photos as places where she is able to reach now that she has grown. This example shows Laura's understanding of her physical growth, when in the past she was not able to reach as high as she now could at the time when she took the photo. The physical development mediated Laura's sense of agency and how she was narrating between past and present. Another example from Laura's visual narrations of temporality was a photo of a clock. In this photo, she narrated how she knows how to read the time, but she would like to learn to read it better. In this example, her narration is of a future contrasting with the present.

The cultural expectations of learning as a developmental activity at school was visible in first grade and pointed particularly towards the present, whereas in pre-primary education, children oriented towards various activities in the present without narrating them as learning. In addition, cultural expectations towards play were clearly visible in children's visual narrations and offered discontinuity between pre-primary and primary education settings. In pre-primary education, children narrated play with various photos. For example, Anna narrated that she often has an influence on what she plays through a photo in which she has portrayed her peers playing a board game. At school, neither play nor playing a game was mentioned in any of the children's visual narrations. This serves as an example of how these two sociocultural settings—pre-primary education and primary education—differed and served no continuity towards play.

This dissertation provides an understanding of how agency mediates children's educational engagement and children's learning. Concentrating on promoting, maintaining, and negotiating, agency can offer an understanding on the sociocultural conditions for agency.

When it comes to the modalities of agency, children were asked to use them to make meaning of their sociocultural conditions. As an example of the modality 'to feel something' in Leo's photos in pre-primary education, he took a photo of himself by a mirror because he felt happy about himself. On the other hand, Emma, as an example of her photos taken in primary education about the modalities 'to know how to do something' and 'being able to do something', described the cultural expectations of which she was aware. Emma took a photo from a wall where cardboard signs of letters were hung. She narrated that she had not known how to write letters correctly until she went to school and now at school she had understood that her abilities to write had improved. In addition, when going through her photos, she stopped at a photo which she had taken from a piece of fruit which a child from an upper grade had crafted and she said that she could not do it because she is younger than the child who crafted it.

In research, agency and sense of agency are concepts which are widely acknowledged but in practice with children, the conceptualisations are not a part of everyday discussions. In this regard, the modalities of agency worked as a key element in discovering the sociocultural resources which mediated children's agency as supporting and restricting it. It was interesting that in both activity systems, children narrated the modality 'have influence on' rarely or not at all in situations in which there were opportunities for real transformative agency. The narrations regarding choosing a colour for a drawing or deciding what to do during a short recess do not reflect the actual agency, when transforming positions or changing the course of activities would offer opportunities for children to exercise agency (Stetsenko, 2008, 2013). Nevertheless, the small opportunities that children had to make decisions and direct an activity must be highly appreciated, as they support children's growth to becoming active agents (see Edwards & D'Arcy, 2004).

Moreover, these results reveal how empowering early years classroom activities promote children's agency. The results indicate how visual narrative inquiry offers a potential pedagogical tool for educational practitioners to value children's agency and use the tool to concentrate on children's sense of agency, particularly in early years educational contexts. This tool offers children a way to discover their own sense of agency and document it; it also offers a tool for early years practitioners for how to listen to children and a method for children to have an influence in the learning environment. Educational practitioners can also discover the sociocultural resources which promote and maintain children's sense of agency or even to hinder children's sense of agency. With this tool, educators may be able to discover children's social and material environments and how these support children's learning.

## 6.2 STUDY 2

Objective 2: To create understanding about teachers' agency when they design pedagogy.

*Research question 3: How is teachers' agency manifested when learning materials which aim to promote multiliteracy learning are adapted in the local context?*

Here, I describe Study 2, in which my co-researchers and I focused on teachers' agency in designing pedagogical activities. Our aim was to investigate how four Finnish teachers in early childhood education and pre-primary education use learning materials and designed pedagogy based on the materials that were created by two of the researchers involved in this study. We also wanted to find out how these teachers—two ECE teachers and two pre-primary teachers—narrate the utilization of the materials, and how agency can be traced from the teachers' narrations. We were particularly interested in teachers' transformative agency, which we defined as an activity which transforms the existing frame of action (Virkkunen, 2006). Teachers in Finland have autonomy in conducting their teaching by the national core curricula for ECE and pre-primary education both of which guide teachers and other ECE practitioners by providing a framework to design pedagogy. Teachers are trusted to deliver the curricula autonomously because of their high education level (see FNAE, 2018; Paronen & Lappi, 2018; Toom & Husu, 2016); they are also allowed freedom in choosing the learning materials that they prefer to use. Previous research proves teachers' agency to be essential in understanding children's agency; moreover, experiencing agency themselves mediates their understanding of how to promote children's agency. The nature of agency is varied and evolves in interaction which also defines teachers'

actions during the multifaceted situations with children and other educational practitioners (see Lipponen & Kumpulainen, 2011.)

### 6.2.1 STUDY

The teachers in this study voluntarily employed playful and open-ended learning material created by the Joy of Learning Multiliteracies development program's (MOI) researchers, and with artists. The material is entitled *Whisper of the Spirit* and its aim is to provide tools with which to design multiliteracy pedagogy and develop children's understanding of multiliteracy, as well as take an interest in Finnish nature and ancient myths (Erfwing et al., 2017). The material was designed to be open source, which has two implications. It is freely available for anyone to use and free to adapt and use without being prescriptive, thereby leaving the teacher the autonomy and trust to use it in the manner that they deem the best. Multiliteracy as a new concept in national core curricula is multifaceted and the curricula only remotely suggests how the pedagogy of multiliteracy should be designed, thereby emphasizing its importance and meaningfulness (FNAE, 2016a; FNAE, 2018).

### 6.2.2 RESULTS

Teachers designed various projects based on the *Whisper of the Spirit* material with their group of children and other educational practitioners. As one example, Saara designed a project in which children could learn about multiliteracy through imagination, play, digital applications, and arts. She was willing to take children's initiatives into account with regard to the project and she encouraged children to allow the project to evolve independently without any strict guidance from her. Saara had a strong interest in art education and she emphasised arts in different activities during the project, as she had an autonomous understanding that children are able to understand multiliteracy through arts. This reveals agency in the interaction between the MOI material and the curriculum, as her understanding of the meaningfulness of arts was initiated autonomously by her.

The results show that learning materials which are created to be open-ended can promote teachers' agency. From the teachers' narrations, we depicted transformative agency, that is, an interactive activity which breaks away from the existing practices (see e.g. Rajala, Hilppö, Lipponen & Kumpulainen, 2011; Kajamaa & Kumpulainen, 2019; Stetsenko, 2008). Transformative agency manifested itself through the expertise of the teachers, as they delivered the curriculum, which is a framework rather than a prescriptive document, and adapted it into the local context. When teachers used open source, open-ended, and non-prescriptive MOI material, they creatively embedded activities and materials in addition to the material for

which the material guides the content, which in this study was the pedagogy of multiliteracy. As we argued, learning and teaching multiliteracy as a manifold and complex concept demands various interactive applications and pedagogical intelligence for a teacher to master.

In Susanna's narrations of her pedagogical designing and teaching, as an example, transformative agency manifested itself in her creative pedagogical design. She designed playful activities enhancing children's meaning making around multiliteracy, such as taking photos and creating animations based on them, making movies, singing and dancing, playing games, and storytelling. Narrating how she used the material made visible transformative agency and how it manifested itself while she balanced between the open learning material, and the vision of activities which would meet the children's needs and initiatives and also respond to the objectives of the curriculum. She discussed, took advice, negotiated, and reflected on her past experiences and the understanding she had about multiliteracy pedagogy. She described multiple ideas and activities which she created from the material and narrated her enthusiasm towards the material.

Thus, the teachers' sense of agency was evident in their narrations regarding their autonomy and ability to deliver the curriculum particularly in terms of multiliteracy. Their mutual objective provided by the curricula to support children's learning and understanding of multiliteracy was divided into several learning activities for children to make meaning which all teachers evaluated as being beneficial for the children. They narrated how an open learning material inspired them to be creative, and, respectively, did not narrate the material to be too open, which indicates a strong sense of their professional abilities to deliver the curriculum freely with the help of a learning material. Teachers' conceptualisation and implementation of multiliteracy and multiliteracy pedagogy in addition to multiliteracy being a novel and manifold concept indicates their level of expertise and strong sense of agency.

The results of Study 2 address the third research question and show how the teachers' agency manifested itself when they designed the multiliteracy pedagogy. The Finnish curricula (FNAE, 2016a; FNAE, 2018) offers opportunities for teachers to practise agency, particularly when designing pedagogy and using learning materials which they prefer and feel motivated to use. Our study addressed how teachers' agency manifests itself in the pedagogical designing, in the activities which they had designed with children and other educational practitioners, and the outputs of the children.

### **6.3 STUDY 3**

Objective 3: To discover how interaction between children's and ECE practitioners promote children's agency

*Research question 4: How do the interactional dynamics between children's initiatives and ECE practitioners' responses support or hinder children's agency?*

Study 3 concentrated on children and early years educational practitioners in ECE centre and their interaction, which develops from children's initiatives and ECE practitioners' responses. Initiatives can be described as verbal or non-verbal openings which aim to change or direct the flow of the interaction and responses as the level of engagement which the respondent recognises as non-verbal or verbal responses (Linell, 2009; Kajamaa & Hilli, 2014). In this study children's initiatives and how ECE practitioners respond to them are significant in promoting children's agency.

### 6.3.1 STUDY

In Study 3, eight children aged five years old and two ECE practitioners participated in this study in a typical ECE centre. They carried out a project called 'The Whisper', which was based on *Whisper of the Spirit* (Erfving et al., 2018). The project was designed by the ECE practitioners and included various adult-initiated activities. I collected the main data with the ECE practitioners by videoing the activities. I used ECE practitioners' notes, and other documents, such as the ECE centre's action plan as secondary data to support my interpretations. The data were analysed through Interaction Analysis (Jordan & Henderson, 1995).

### 6.3.2 RESULTS

In our study, we concentrated on children's initiatives and ECE practitioners' responses in terms of promoting or hindering children's agency and how ECE practitioners' responses can either promote or hinder children's agency. Our results depicted a typology with several modes through which children took initiatives including *ideating, suggesting, asking a question, challenging, and refusing*. *Asking a question* refers to a situation in which the child asks a question related or unrelated to the ongoing interaction. *Suggesting* refers to a situation in which the child suggests something new which is not related to the ongoing interaction. *Challenging* refers to a situation in which the child challenges the ongoing interaction by sticking by his/her own idea. *Refusing* refers to a situation in which the child refuses the ongoing interaction by words or gestures. *Ideating* refers to a situation in which the child invents something and brings it into the ongoing interaction. The ECE practitioners' responses include several modes such as *accepting, adapting, accepting after a rejection, rejecting or ignoring*. *Accepting* refers to the situation in which the

ECE practitioner accepts the child's initiative directly. *Accepting after a rejection* refers to a situation when the child's is rejected at first, but as the interaction develops, it changes into acceptive. *Adapting* refers to a situation when the ECE practitioner adapts the child's initiative by changing and developing the interaction. *Rejecting or ignoring* refers to a situation when the child's initiative is rejected or ignored verbally or gesturally by the ECE practitioner.

One example of an episode in which interaction promoted agency is an episode involving five-year-olds Vera and Leo, and the ECE practitioner Maria, as they were creating an animation together. Vera and Leo created a plot for their animation and were playing with moulded figures at the same time. Maria gave instructions for children to remember the plot while they would next start to take the photos for the animation. Vera wanted to continue playing by saying 'Let's play with these!' to which Maria responded, 'Let's first create the animation and then play.' Vera agreed with Maria's response and started first to create the animation and then she had time to play with Leo. In this example Vera's initiation was *suggesting* when she suggested a new activity. Maria's response was *adapting* as she adapted Vera's initiation and agreed that Vera and Leo could play after they had finished the creation of the animation. Another example of an episode in which the interaction hindered agency is when Joe and Emma were moulding the characters for their animation; in the same session, they began creating the plot for the animation as well. Joe was quicker in moulding, when Linda, an ECE practitioner, gave instructions to Joe to begin creating the plot. Joe followed Linda's instructions and began ideating the story by telling it aloud. Linda responded to Joe's ideating by rejecting the story and saying that he should not create the story with Emma. The interaction between Joe and Linda lapsed and Joe continued playing with his moulded spirit.

Overall, the results of study 3 indicate that ECE practitioners' acceptive responses to children's initiatives, which I call an acceptive interaction, support children's agency. The acceptive interaction refers to responses by which educational practitioners listen to the children and together children and ECE practitioners include children's initiatives in a dialogue with children in everyday practices. The study showed that immediate acceptance was not necessary, as long as the children's initiatives were considered in the long run. However, a direct rejective response without any consideration of taking the child's initiative into account disrupted the interaction and did not lead in the direction from which the child's initiative was originally started. In addition, the typology which I created enables the understanding of complex and dynamic interaction to be deepened, which promotes or hinders children's agency and shows that agency can be achieved through dialogical interaction. In sum, the results bring forward that the children's agency is built on joint interaction, thus agency is a matter of interaction even though the nature of activity would be adult-led and adult-designed. Promoting children's agency calls for pedagogical design of the overall interaction.

The main findings of the three studies are illustrated in Table 2.

**Table 2**      *The three studies and their main results*

<b>The Study</b>	<b>Main findings</b>
Study 1	<p>People, artefacts, activity and interaction, and environments' rules and goals mediated the cultural resources in children's photos and narrations.</p> <p>The temporality was negotiated in situated moments and across contexts having different meanings depending on the context.</p> <p>Visual narrative inquiry offers a potential pedagogical tool for educational practitioners to listen to children and value children's agency. For children, the tool offers opportunities to discover their own sense of agency, document their agency and influence their learning environment.</p>
Study 2	<p>Teachers' agency was associated with their autonomy towards pedagogical design, eagerness and motivation towards multiliteracy, and pedagogical expertise.</p>
Study 3	<p>A dialogic interaction of children's initiatives and ECE practitioners' responses can promote children's agency.</p> <p>Pedagogy which acknowledges dialogical interactions must be considered in early years educational contexts across activities.</p> <p>The typology created offers a means to study children's initiatives and ECE practitioners' responses.</p>

## 7 DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

### 7.1 MAIN FINDINGS

My main objective with my dissertation was to investigate how agency manifests itself in early years pedagogy, particularly at the micro-level. I wanted to understand how sociocultural resources mediate children's sense of agency and how the interaction between children and ECE practitioners promotes or hinders children's agency. In addition, I wanted to understand teachers' agency in their pedagogical design in the Finnish educational context in which teachers have the autonomy to choose the learning materials and they are trusted to deliver the curriculum autonomously. This dissertation emphasizes the importance of agency and early years education and concentrates on how it could be promoted and also, how it can be hindered.

This dissertation investigated children's and adults' relational agency in a sociocultural framework, which is grounded in previous sociocultural research in education (see e.g. Vygotsky, 1978; 1990; Wertsch, 1995; Bruner, 1996) and sociocultural studies of agency (see e.g. Emirbayer & Mische, 1998; Biesta & Tedder, 2006; Edwards & D'Arcy, 2004; Greeno, 2006; Kumpulainen & Lipponen, 2010; Lipponen & Kumpulainen, 2011). Relational agency stems from the new paradigm of the research of childhood (Prout & James, 2017; James, 2009), where children's agency, (and childhood itself), is important in people's lives. I also emphasise that children have agency, and they shape their lifeworlds as active participants. The contribution of this dissertation is relational, as Alanen (2012) has also stated; hence, I approached agency as a relational phenomenon through which agency is conceptualised as a relationship between children and the context in which they act. Through this approach, I illuminated the interactions among children, adults, and the environment, and how the interactions between individuals and their environment is embedded in cultural norms. I also aimed to define what the tools to support and value agency in early years learning contexts could be.

The visual narrations of children's agency carry temporal dimensions in children's reconstructions of their identities and how children narrate their agency is an integral part of development of their identity. (Wenger, 1998; Hand, 2006; Nasir & Hand, 2008). As Emirbayer and Mische (1998) state

... human agency [is] a temporally embedded process of social engagement, informed by the past (in its habitual aspect), but also oriented toward the future (as a capacity to imagine alternative possibilities and toward the present (as a capacity to contextualize past

habits and future projects within the contingencies of the moment). The agentic dimension of social action can only be captured in its full complexity, we argue, if it is analytically situated within the flow of time. (Emirbayer & Mische, 1998, brackets in original).

From this conceptualisation, Biesta and Tedder (2007) developed the view that past and future are always present in terms of agency as the agency resonates with the past, orients to the future and manifests itself in the present. With a visual narration of an individual's sense of agency, I connected the narrations to children's regenerated past, imagined future, and conceived present.

Previous research on agency in the early years (see e.g. Kronqvist, 2004; Rainio, 2010) indicates that children are able to practise their agency during free play, in contrast my study indicated that adult-initiated activities can support children's agency if the interaction is dialogical and acceptive. In free play, children are allowed to take initiatives and lead the direction of the interaction and activities by taking initiatives without adults preventing them. The research brings forward that in adult-initiated pedagogical situations, children's initiatives are conceived as unwanted behaviour and children's attempts to seize the power when adults must have the power of leading the situation (Rainio, 2010; Rajala, 2016), which indicates that in adult-initiated situations the children's role would be as passive actors. However, the results outlined in this dissertation indicated that children are also able to practise agency in adult-initiated situations. Following the results of Study 3, if ECE practitioners consider children's initiatives during activities, children's agency can be promoted. Then, it is not a question of the nature of the activity but the interaction during the activity. This is aligned with Finnish national curricula (FNAE, 2018; FNAE, 2016a; FNAE, 2016b), which state that ECE, pre-primary, and early primary education must consist of diverse activities including child-initiated and adult-initiated activities.

This dissertation makes a methodological contribution by widening the understanding of participatory methods and visual ethnographic methods, particularly when conducting research with children and ECE practitioners in early years educational settings. Study 1 illuminated how young children's sense of agency and views can be investigated. The modalities of agency (Jyrkämä, 2008) offered an analytical tool with which to investigate children's sense of agency. Visual narrative inquiry provides a methodology which operates as a potential method to investigate children's sense of agency. In Study 2, conducting open-ended interviews with visuals elicited information which produced extended information of ECE teachers' views and reflections. In addition, in Study 3, video ethnography offered a potential method through which to investigate interaction between children and ECE practitioners in an ECE classroom. The typology which I created following the work of Kajamaa and Hilli (2014) and Kronqvist (2004) is a useful tool to trace and analyse the complex dynamics of various modes of children's initiatives and ECE practitioners' responses to them. The typology can be used to analyse

children's initiatives and responses to them in different contexts, like in an informal context, such as libraries or museums, and importantly also in children's homes (see e.g. Erstad et al., 2016). In addition, the typology is a tool to analyse interaction across contexts, that is, the interaction between ECE context and homes could be also be analysed using the typology (see e.g. Erstad et al., 2016). Overall, visual ethnography methodology offers an operational tool for studying people's views when a visual function as one text among vocal and written texts (Pink, 2006). With today's digital devices, I had a variety of options to conduct studies by including visuals as methods to discover relational agency.

In addition to my contribution in the field of research, my methodological decisions offer insights for teachers' and another educational practitioners' work. The methods used in this dissertation can serve as tools for practitioners to concentrate on promoting children's agency as well as reflect on their own agentic experiences. The visual narrative inquiry offers one tool and the typology of another, which could be used by teachers to consider and explore the promotion or hindering of agency. Lipponen & Kumpulainen (2011) state that teachers who understand how agency is supported and promoted are also able to promote children's agency. Promoting and maintaining learners' agency thus requires pedagogy which understands how the agency is built and constructed. When children are exercising agency, they are able to become active participants in the world around them. Although the Finnish early years curricula state that children must be able to exercise agency in ECE, pre-primary education and primary education and they must be active agents, the documents do not offer practical tools for teachers to respond to these demands. To meet the requirements, early years teachers and other practitioners should understand what agency is and obtain guidance to develop practical ways to promote children's agency, as their current form curricula offer an option for teachers to practise agency, as I stated in Study 2.

Overall, the results of my dissertation widen the understanding of relational agency in Finnish early years pedagogy. Through the studies, I was able to illuminate the pedagogy-related aspects which promote agency. As a concluding overview, based on the relational understanding that agency lies in the interaction between people and the environment and it is something that people do, achieving agency requires negotiation regardless of the activity. That is, the pedagogical activity itself does not restrict or enable children's agency, but the interaction during the activity has an impact on achieving agency. Hence, early years educational activities must provide opportunities for children to take various roles. In order to achieve this, the curricula should define agency in a wider manner, in keeping with the latest research. Importantly, children or ECE practitioners must not merely repeat the activities but on the contrary, they should constantly question and challenge the ongoing situations and strive to adapt their questioning and challenging into the existing situations and activities to create opportunities for agency to manifest itself. In addition, the Finnish curricula must recognise defining

agency from the relational perspective, that is, emphasizing dialogic interaction between people and environment when defining agency.

## 7.2 FUTURE RESEARCH DIRECTIONS

This dissertation has illuminated agency as a relational activity in a socio-cultural frame in early years pedagogy as part of the Finnish educational system. Research on formal and informal learning contexts which create meaningful learning experiences deserves further study with wide theoretical and methodological lenses. As I have written with Kristiina Kumpulainen and Alexandra Nordström, digital technologies expand children's (learning) environments beyond physical spaces (Kumpulainen, Sairanen & Nordström, 2019; Kumpulainen, Sairanen & Nordström, submitted). The use of digital literacies in young children's homes is a research area which has not been addressed in Finland. This would widen the understanding of early years pedagogy. In addition, multimodality offers multiple learning opportunities for children to make meaning of the environment in which they act. Collaborating with Jenni Vartiainen and Alexandra Nordström, we developed a novel pedagogical model called storyhacking (Vartiainen, Sairanen & Nordström, 2019), the aim of which is to enable children's transitions in meaning-making across analogue and digital environments with multimodal methods. Sintonen (2020) argues that new theoretical approaches, such as new materialism and post-human thinking will provide new insights into young children's digital and nondigital usage of materials. In addition, these theoretical approaches widen the understanding of agency with emphasis on agency of materials and deserve further investigation in early years educational context (see also Charteris & Smardon, 2018).

Further, as revealed in Study 1, there is a fluctuation in the continuity of pedagogy which supports children's agency further in transitions, which children come across in their early years, particularly in the Finnish educational system. The legislation and curricula are unambiguous about transitions, but the pedagogical practices are not. As Study 2 revealed, teachers in Finland design pedagogy in multifaceted ways. Even though the number of teachers in my study was small, we were still able to draw the conclusion that pedagogical design varies in Finnish early years classrooms. Pedagogical design which aims to promote agency could advance our early years curricula and clarify and emphasise its importance in future curriculum reform. The development of pedagogy which emphasises children's agency continuously in early years learning requires further research and development and addressing transitions in early years with a specific interest in children's agency. Additionally, children experience transitions beyond formal learning environments, for example, at home. However, this does not end with Finnish children and the Finnish educational system. Children across

countries and cultures experience transformations from one context to another, which widens the opportunities for future research even further. The typology which I created in Study 3 could be employed to widen the research of relational agency worldwide or be used as a springboard to develop another typology. As Biesta and Tedder (2006) argue, referring to the UN's convention on the rights of the child (1989), education must offer agentic options for children; thus, curriculum must emphasise children's engagement in dialogic decision-making for young children in their learning environments.

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# APPENDIXES

## **Appendix 1. The modalities of agency as instructions for children's photos**

1. Take a photo or photos of an object or objects which reflect(s) to you your ability to can or cannot do something.
2. Take a photo or photos of an object or objects which reflect(s) you being able to or unable to do something.
3. Take a photo or photos of an object or objects on which you want or do not want to do something. The object of the photo does not have to be realistic; it can be anything you think of.
4. Take a photo or photos of an object or objects which arouse a feeling or feelings in you.
5. Take a photo or photos of an object or objects on which you can decide something, or you cannot decide anything.

**Appendix 2. The semi-structured interview questions for teachers**

Please go through what you did on the project.

How did you plan the project?

Which environments did you work in?

What outputs did children make/create?

Which activities did you undertake during the project?

What materials did you use during the project?