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## **A Visual Narrative Inquiry into Children's Sense of Agency in Preschool and First Grade**

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# **A Visual Narrative Inquiry into Children’s Sense of Agency in Preschool and First Grade**

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## **Abstract**

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

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**Keywords:** Children’s sense of agency, modalities of agency, sociocultural perspective, educational settings, engagement, visual narrative inquiry

# Una Investigación Narrativa Visual en el Sentido de Agencia de los Niños en Infantil y Primer Grado

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## Resumen

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Este estudio de caso de marco sociocultural se centra en el sentido de la agencia de los niños y niñas en contextos educativos. El estudio tiene dos objetivos: (a) reflejar las modalidades sobre su sentido de agencia en preescolar y primaria, (b) identificar los recursos socioculturales que median el sentido de agencia en estos contextos de actividad. Perseguimos estos objetivos a través de una investigación narrativa visual con foto-narración de los niños y niñas (N:5) sobre su sentido de agencia. Los resultados indican el arraigo sociocultural del sentido de agencia de los niños y niñas. También muestran continuidades y discontinuidades en el sentido de agencia entre preescolar y los primeros cursos de primaria. El sentido de la agencia fue mediado por personas y objetos materiales, así como por normas, objetivos, tiempos-estructuras e interacciones sociales de los contextos de actividad. Estos resultados son fundamentales para entender cómo apoyar el compromiso educativo de los niños y niñas y su transición positiva a la escuela. La investigación narrativa visual ofrece una metodología potencial para escuchar a los niños y niñas, sobre todo en cuanto a su sentido de agencia.

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**Palabras clave:** sentido de agencia de los niños y niñas, modalidades de la agencia, perspectiva sociocultural, contextos educativos, participación, investigación narrativa visual



Although agency, that is, the capacity of individuals to act independently and to make their own free choices, has historically been recognized as a valuable part of human life in most Western societies, it is only recently that the recognition and appreciation of agency in children has been emphasized in educational research, practice, and policy. There are many explanations for this phenomenon. From one perspective, contemporary interest in the agency of children is a result of initiatives that have stressed the voices of children and their right to participate in society, which includes the freedom to express opinions and to have a say in matters that affect their lives (Einarsdottir, 2007; Cook & Hess, 2007; Wyness, 1999; Marr & Malone, 2007; The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, 1989).

Another explanation emphasizes agency as a pivotal element in childhood learning and development. Agency is something that education should recognize and develop (Biesta & Tedder, 2006; Ecclestone, 2007). In these discussions, agency is viewed both as an educational means and as an end itself. That is, it is seen as a means of promoting meaningful and productive educational engagement and learning and of building identity (Gresalfi, Martin, Hand, & Greeno, 2009; Engle & Conant, 2002; Kumpulainen & Lipponen, 2010; Kumpulainen, 2013), and as a disposition that should be cultivated through education, as it can help children to develop a transformative activist stance in relation to society, life, and learning (Stetsenko, 2013). Education should create opportunities for children's active agency who can adopt deliberative, responsible, and transformative dispositions in relation to their current and future personal, professional, and public lives (Emirbayer & Mische, 1998).

Human agency has also been connected to transitions and boundary crossings during the course of life (e.g., Ecclestone, 2007; Ecclestone, Biesta, & Hughes, 2009; Eteläpelto, Vähäsantanen, Hökkä, & Paloniemi, 2013; Zittoun, 2006). Here, the recognition and appreciation of agency are seen as ensuring continuity, engagement, and a sense of belonging, such as in the context of educational transitions. Agency has also played a central role in educational efforts to create transformative interaction between individuals' funds of knowledge and their informal and formal cultural

worlds, with the goal of promoting educational equity and opportunity (Barton & Tan, 2010; Ito et al., 2013; Kumpulainen & Mikkola, 2014; González, Moll, & Amanti, 2005).

In this article, we conform to these perspectives on the importance of recognizing and promoting children’s agency in the educational process. We want to uncover the sociocultural conditions and resources, including relational contexts, symbolic systems, and institutional practices, that mediate and structure children’s agency in preschool and first grade. Moreover, instead of analyzing how agency is keyed to a single location or situation, we examine the sense of agency across educational settings. As recent studies of agency suggest, it is pivotal to look both within and across various settings and time-scales if we want to capture the genesis and sociocultural dynamics of agency formation (e.g., Haapasaari, Engeström, & Kerosuo, 2014).

In respecting the voices and participation rights of children, and regarding children as important knowledge producers, we emphasize the children’s perspectives of their own agency (see also McCarthy, Sullivan, & Wright, 2006). Therefore, we focus on children’s sense of agency in educational settings. With this approach, we aim to capture the many ways in which children sense their agency within their life worlds (Christensen & James, 2008; Smith, Duncan, & Marshall, 2005). We do not posit standard developmental capacities at certain ages, but rather focus on the ways in which agency is explained from the perspective of the child in a social context.

The methodological approach we propose is visual ethnography, in which children are invited, as research collaborators, to explore and document their sense of agency through a process of visual narrative inquiry (Bach, 2008; Pink, 2007). Founded on the understanding of narratives as experience and as a means for human meaning-making, narrative inquiry is not only about individual experiences, but also the social, cultural, and historical contexts in which the experiences of individuals are formed, including how agency is constructed, shaped, and expressed across space and time (McAdams, Josselson, & Lieblich, 2006).

A visual narrative approach to understanding the sense of agency in children in educational settings is a promising method for exploring how

different social settings—and their material, social, and cultural resources and conditions—offer possibilities and challenges and create continuities and discontinuities. This, in turn, has consequences with regard to educational engagement, learning opportunities, and identity building in children (see e.g. Hand, 2006; Nasir & Hand, 2008; Nichols & Berliner, 2007; Wortham, 2006).

### **Agency as an Interactional Achievement**

In our study, we examine the relational nature of children's agency via modalities; that is, agency is constructed as interaction between the individual and the social context across temporal and cultural spaces (Archer, 2000). In following the work of Jyrkämä (2008) and narrative semiotics in general (Greimas & Porter, 1977), we pay analytic attention to the modalities of children's sense of agency in and across preschool and first grade settings, which account for children's 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.

Through these modalities, we examine the ways in which the children's sense of agency, including their aspirations, beliefs, and competencies, interact with the sociocultural context, such as the rules and resources of the preschool and first grade settings. The modalities thus illuminate the limits and possibilities of agency created by these social contexts and how children transform social contexts to serve personal and/or collective ends.

The theoretical grounding of our study draws on the sociocultural notions of agency (see e.g. Edwards, 2005; Kumpulainen & Lipponen, 2010, 2013; Rainio, 2008; Wertsch, Tulviste, & Hagstrom, 1996). According to this conceptual framework, agency can be understood as relational, contextually situated, and emerging from interactions between the child and their social

context. From this perspective, human agency is not a fixed trait, property, or capability that resides in the individual, but an action that shifts in relation to the social context (Biesta & Tedder, 2006; Greeno, 2006; Gresalfi, Martin, Hand, & Greeno, 2009; Schwartz & Okita, 2009; Zittoun, 2006).

From the sociocultural perspective, agency evolves in sociocultural settings, and it is tightly connected to the motives and contradictions these entail. A sociocultural setting can be defined as a set of interacting contexts that mediate agency. Each context comprises a unique configuration of activities, material resources, relationships, and interactions (Barron, 2006). Although initiated by individuals, agentive actions gain their meaning, their consequences, and their continuity from the interplay between individuals and social context. In this sense, agency is relationally produced and maintained. To this end, agency should be analyzed by focusing on the emergence of agency in social contexts and an individual's meanings and purposes in relation to their agency across space and time (Kumpulainen, Lipponen, Hilppö, & Mikkola, 2013).

Lately, the importance of understanding the sociocultural conditions that mediate individual agency have been increasingly recognized (see e.g. Bjerke, 2011; Kumpulainen & Lipponen, 2010; Markström & Hallden, 2009; Rainio, 2008, 2010; Rajala, Hilppö, Lipponen, & Kumpulainen, 2013). It is important to understand how social contexts and their material, social, and cultural resources regulate agency as well as how agency can mediate and transform the social context. At present, we lack research on how different activity settings and their sociocultural resources mediate the sense of agency in children as they experience it.

Furthermore, although the relationship between agency and time has been addressed in the existing literature (see Emirbayer & Mische, 1998), the emergence and development of agency over time has seldom been systematically analyzed in empirical research. At present, we lack knowledge about how individuals adjust and orientate their agentive actions toward the past, present, and future in different situational contexts (Haapasaari, Engeström, & Kerosuo, 2014). We also aim to contribute to this unexplored field by focusing our investigation on the temporal orientation of the sense of agency in children across social contexts.

To this end, we use visual images (i.e., photos) in a narrative inquiry into children's sense of agency across space and time (e.g., Clandinin & Connelly, 1996; Gillen & Cameron, 2010). Through this visual narrative inquiry, we aim to shed light on the sense of agency in children, and its links to the past, present, and future embedded within the social, cultural, and institutional contexts (Bach, 2008; Pink, 2007; Taylor & Littleton, 2006). The images are a medium through which we can better understand and analyze the children's narrative constructions of their sense of agency—in granular moments and across time—and a method for representing the complexity of their lives (see e.g. Bloustein & Baker, 2003; Tinkler, 2008).

In accordance with theories that define identity as narrative (see e.g. Bruner, 1987, 1991; McAdams, Josselson, & Ruthellen, 2006; Ricoeur, 1984), we postulate that individuals form their identities by integrating their life experiences within an internalized, evolving story of the self. Narrative is a dynamic process that constitutes both the way in which we organize events and experiences in our lives to make sense of them and the way in which we participate in creating the things we make sense of, including ourselves. A visual narration of an individual's sense of agency integrates their reconstructed past, perceived present, and imagined future. From this perspective, we posit that the ways in which children experience their sense of agency is integral to the development of their identities (Hand, 2006; Nasir & Saxe, 2003; Nasir & Hand, 2008; Sford & Prusak, 2005; Wenger, 1998; Wortham, 2006).

## **Study**

The study discussed in this paper has two objectives: (a) to portray the modalities of the sense of agency in children across preschool and first grade settings, and (b) to identify the sociocultural resources that mediate the sense of agency in children within these two activity contexts. We seek to achieve these ends using a visual narrative inquiry, which entails the children's photo-narration of their sense of agency in preschool and then primary school settings.

In this study, we ask two research questions:



- How do children narrate their sense of agency across space and time within the context of preschool and first grade settings?
- What are the sociocultural resources that children identify as mediating their sense of agency in the two educational settings?

## **Method**

### **Participants**

Five children—Anna, Henri, Laura, Leo, and Emma (three girls and two boys)—aged from 6 to 7 years old participated in this study. The children participated in the study while attending preschool and then first grade. The recruitment was based on child and parental interest and willingness to be involved.

At the beginning of the study, the following ethical permissions were sought: institutional approvals from the local daycare center and school authorities and voluntary, informed consent from the children, parents, and teachers. In order to ensure the children's anonymity, their names are replaced with pseudonyms.

### **Setting**

The empirical study was situated in a Finnish day care center that provides preschool education and in the two primary schools to which the children transitioned for their first year of school. The schools and the day-care center are run by the city of Helsinki and located in the northern part of the capital, and they serve a demographically (including ethnically and socio-economically) diverse group of children and families.

In Finland, pre-primary education is a subjective right for all children, and it is typically provided to children one year before starting school. While it is voluntary, about 98% of Finnish six-year-olds attend preschool. In Finland, compulsory education commonly starts when a child turns seven years old (Act, 1998). Both preschool and primary education follow the national core curriculum guidelines, which are further developed as local

curricula (NBE, 2010; NBE, 2004). While the overall distribution of lesson hours has been decided by the Government, day care centers and schools can design their own timetables for preschool and basic education. Pedagogical accountability is also distributed at the local level, which gives day care centers and schools the freedom to create their own pedagogical practices within the framework of the national core curriculum.

In the Finnish preschool and basic education core curricula, the emphasis is placed on child-centered learning as well as on children's engagement and participation rights in educational practices and decision-making. The appreciation and promotion of children's agency in educational practice is considered an educational imperative that supports learning, wellbeing, and healthy development in general (NBE, 2010; NBE, 2004).

In this study, the preschool was part of a day care class, which consisted of about 30 children from 3 to 6 years old. Sixteen of these children were preschoolers. The children attended preschool for four hours per day, while the rest of their day was spent as part of the day care class. During the preschool period, the children used their own classroom as well as the spaces of the day care center. The preschool classroom was shared with the entire day care class. Every child had their own locker, which is where they kept their outdoor clothes and private belongings. The children also had their own drawers, which is where they kept their learning materials, such as books and handouts. In the preschool, the children did not have personal desks. In general, their learning spaces were mobile and distributed across the day care center.

After preschool, the children who participated in the study transitioned to two different primary schools and to three different first grade classrooms. The first grade classes consisted of around 20 children each. The physical environments of the first grade classrooms were quite similar. Children had their own desks, which is where they kept their materials, books, etc. In all the classrooms, the teacher's table was located at the front of the classroom, together with a blackboard and some educational technology.

## **Data Collection**

The data collection was handled by the preschool teacher, who was also the researcher in this study. The data collection was continued at the children's primary schools, albeit only in the role of a researcher. The data collection took place in the spring term at the daycare center and during the following fall term in the first grade settings of the primary schools, encompassing a nine-month period.

The data collection in this study was framed by a visual narrative inquiry, which entailed the children's photo-documentation and photo-narration of their sense of agency in the preschool and then in the primary school settings. The children's photo-narration took place during their photo-documentation and later in their interviews about their photos. Before the actual visual narration, every child learned how to take photographs with the digital camera. The researcher and the children talked about the cameras and photography as well as about the research project and its goals and phases.

The instructions for the visual narration in the preschool and first grade settings followed the analytical categorization of the modalities of agency (Jyrkämä, 2008). In this study, the modalities of agency thus guided the children's visual narration of their sense of agency. That is, the children were asked to communicate their sense of agency via their photo images by documenting matters that (a) they could and were able to do, i.e. 'Can and be able to', (b) matters that were linked to their feelings and wants, i.e. 'Feel and want', and (c) matters they could and could not take part in and influence, i.e. 'Participate and influence'.

The children could take as many photographs as they wanted. The children were shadowed and observed by the researcher during their photo-documentation as a means to support the children in their work and to gain additional insights into the meanings behind the children's visual narration of their sense of agency.

After photographing, the children were invited to individual interviews. The interviews and the children's photo-documentation were based on the children's visual narration of their sense of agency. During the interviews, the children were invited to explain their photos, including the details of their images and the meanings and connections they made while taking

them. The researcher took part in the children's visual narration to ask for clarification or to support the narration process. The complete interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed.

## **Data Analysis**

In our analysis, based on visual ethnography (e.g., Bach, 2008; Pink, 2007) and narrative studies of identity (e.g., McAdams, Josselson, & Lieblich, 2006), we investigated both the contents of the photo images and the children's oral accounts of their sense of agency as constructed in their interviews. In this study, visual narration encompasses both the children's photos and their oral accounts during their interviews embedded in their photo-reflection. We tried to attend to the meanings behind the children's visual narration and how these meanings, as story experiences, were embedded within social, cultural, and institutional contexts (Bruner, 1987, 1991; Taylor & Littleton, 2006). The specific analytic focus was on the modalities of the children's sense of agency and the sociocultural resources the children identified to for their sense of agency in and across their preschool and first grade settings. In addition, the children's visual narration was analyzed in terms of its temporal characteristics, focusing on the children's past, present, and future orientations regarding their sense of agency.

## **Results**

We shall now turn to the results of the study. First, we will discuss the overall findings of the study in order to provide a more holistic picture of the children's visual narration of their sense of agency as represented in their photo images. Second, we will illuminate the visual narrations of the children's sense of agency as constructed in their interviews.

The outcomes of the analyses of the children's photographs and oral accounts constructed in their interviews are discussed according to three thematic categories that portray the modalities of the children's sense of agency in the preschool and first grade settings. These thematic categories stand for the children's sense of what they could and were able to do (i.e.,

how the children described what they could and were able to do in and across the preschool and first grade settings), what they felt and wanted (i.e., illuminating the children’s feelings and aspirations in the two educational settings), and what they felt they could participate in and influence (i.e., how the children defined their possibilities of taking part and having a say in matters that were important to them in these educational settings).

### **The Children’s Photo Images as Representations of their Sense of Agency**

The five children who participated in this study took a total of 505 photos in their preschool and first grade settings. Of these, 248 photos were taken in the preschool and 157 photos were taken in the first grade setting. In addition to the differences in the number of photos taken in the preschool and first grade settings, the photos differed between the educational settings in terms of their modality. The children photographed many more images in their preschool settings (N:202) related to their sense of being capable than they did in the first grade setting (N:71). Also, the children focused more on their feelings and wants in the preschool (N:122) than in the first grade settings (N:40). The number of photos related to the children’s sense of being able to participate in and influence matters was similar between the educational settings (preschool setting, N: 44; first grade setting, N: 46). However, this modality showed the greatest variation between the children in terms of the number of photos.

Table 1 summarizes the number of photos the children took while documenting their sense of agency in the preschool and first grade settings.

Table 1

*The children’s photos in the preschool and first grade settings*

Modalities of agency	Pre-school setting	First grade setting
Can and be able to	202 photos:	71 photos:
Anna	13	10
Emma	40	21
Henri	35	13
Laura	58	22
Leo	56	5
Feel and want	102 photos:	40 photos:
Anna	18	10
Emma	16	14
Henri	12	12
Laura	31	5
Leo	25	4
Participate and influence	44 photos:	46 photos:
Anna	19	8
Emma	8	8
Henri	1	11
Laura	9	11
Leo	7	8

**The Children’s Visual Narration of their Sense of Agency across Space and Time**

Next, we will illuminate the nature of the children’s visual narrations based on their interviews. While discussing the results, we pay specific attention to the ways in which the modalities of agency occurred in the children’s visual narration and how these fit with the sociocultural resources of the activity

contexts. Thus, our analytic focus addresses the temporal dimensions of the children's sense of agency in addition to the sociocultural and material resources of the activity contexts.

*I can do and I am able to do*

While narrating what they could and were able to do in the preschool setting, the children typically referred to material productions, such as their drawings on a wall. In addition, their visual narration included different physical spaces in the daycare center, classroom, hall, and dining room. The children's sense of what they could and were able to do was also characterized by activities, such as dressing up, drawing, playing board games, doing assignments, and climbing or playing the piano.

The children's visual narration identified similar resources in the first grade settings, which accounted for their sense of feeling competent. However, in the preschool, the sociocultural resources identified by the children were more varied in nature than in the first grade setting. Moreover, some activities, such as playing, appeared to have a much more important role in the preschool setting than in the first grade setting.

Our first example demonstrates Henri's visual narration of his sense of agency in terms of what he felt he was capable of doing in the preschool. In this example, Henri bases his visual narration on a photo image of painted wallpaper. The researcher supports Henri's initiation by asking him to explain the meaning behind the photo.



*Figure 1.* I can do a similar piece by myself.

#### Extract 1

Researcher: And what is in this [photo] what you can do? What did you think?

Henri, preschool: Well, I can do that?

Researcher: Have you ... have you made it by yourself?

Henri: No, but I can do it.

Researcher: You could do it?

Henri: Yes.

Researcher: Ok. Could you do those letters?

Henri: (nods)

Researcher: What about those numbers? Could you do those?

Henri: Yes.

This interaction involves a discussion of a photo Henri had taken of painted wallpaper in order to demonstrate what he could do. Although Henri did not make the wallpaper himself, he nevertheless felt that he could do a similar piece on his own. Henri's visual narration reflects his strong sense of agency in his abilities. As the interaction episode reveals, Henri uses the wallpaper as a projection of his skill in writing letters and numbers. Here, the past, present, and future orientations are a strong part of Henri's narration of his sense of agency with regard to what he felt he was capable of doing.



Our second example features Laura (a preschooler), who had taken a picture of a light switch in the daycare center, as she explains the story behind the photo. In addition to this photo, she had taken photos of bookshelves and her locker to demonstrate what she was capable of reaching.



*Figure 2.* I am able to reach higher.

#### Extract 2

Researcher: -- Then you took a photo from your locker, a bigger one. Do you remember what you thought about this photo?

Laura, preschool: Now I can remember, although I didn't remember earlier. That I'm able to reach up there.

Researcher: Good. Yeah, you are able to reach up there.

Laura: Because, when I was smaller, I couldn't reach there.

Researcher: Ok. Good.

Laura: Here I'm able to reach up there.

Researcher: You are able to reach up there to the shelf where there are board games.

Laura: Yep.

Researcher: Ok, good.

Laura: Then I'm able to reach there as well.

Researcher: You are able to reach there, too?

Laura: Yes.

Researcher: Ok.

Laura: And I could ... I mean, I'm able to take my file by myself.

Researcher: True, although those are quite high. Aren't they?

Laura: Mmm. (nods)

Researcher: Ok.

Laura: And I'm able to reach up to that light switch.

Laura's visual narration of the light switch indicates that Laura saw herself as being able to reach high. She explained that she was able to do so because she was taller than when she was younger. In the conversation with the researcher, Laura referred to many places that she was now able to reach. Laura's defined her understanding of her physical growth by the new opportunities it presented her. That is, she could now switch on the lights by herself. The notion of time is also very present, as Laura talks about her growth in the past, and she compares the present situation to the past. This example illuminates how development, in this case physical development, mediates the children's sense of agency regarding what they conceive they can do in a certain setting.

Our third example demonstrates how the notion of time and the sociocultural expectations interacted dynamically in Emma's visual narration. The extract shows how Emma, who was now a first grader, reflected her own learning and development across space and time. What is also visible in this narration is her awareness of cultural expectations for her agency, learning, and development.



*Figure 3. At school I can write numbers correctly.*

### Extract 3

Emma, school: Well, I ... such like what I couldn't do in preschool but now I am allowed to do it.

Researcher: You can do it or you are allowed to do it?

Emma: I can do it.

Researcher: Ok, so they are what?

Emma: Well, I can write numbers correctly now when I'm in the preschool ... school.

Researcher: Now that you are in school. Yes.

...

Researcher: Let's see, what is the next one? Those were the fruits and vegetables.

Emma: I can't do those, those kind of ... because that was a second grader's job.

In Emma's narration, reflections on growth and development can be identified. Emma had realized progress in her learning. She felt that she was unable to write numbers correctly in preschool, but now in first grade she could. She also realized that there were things that she could still not do. She felt that she could not 'do' fruits and vegetables. What is also evident in Emma's narration is her awareness of cultural expectations. These cultural

expectations appeared to create both opportunities and restrictions with regard to her agency and how she sensed what she was able to do and when.

### *I feel and I want*

The children's visual narrations of their feelings and wants largely focused on people. The children photographed their friends, teachers, other workers, and siblings who were important to them and who they considered as producing positive feelings. The children's visual narrations also revealed negative feelings: sometimes friends, and new and unfamiliar situations, produced uncomfortable and negative feelings. In the preschool, the children took more photos about people than in the schools. Physical spaces and materials, such as pictures, work pieces, and play areas, produced positive feelings.

When narrating their wants, the children explained how they wanted to learn more, to develop a new skill, or to improve a skill they already had. Certain rules that they had to obey in the preschool and in the primary school were also mentioned in the children's visual narrations as regulating their wants. In their visual narrations, the children explained that they faced restrictions in both educational settings, and they wanted to do things that were forbidden to them. Overall, in the preschool, the children concentrated on providing narration about activities they wanted to do and different physical skills they wanted to achieve. In the first grade, the children's visual narrations concentrated more on aspirations that dealt more specifically with learning something new.

In preschool, the children's visual narrations of their feelings and wants concentrated on current activities. In the preschool setting, the children's wants did not appear to include restrictions or demands. They simply took photos of things they wanted to do. In the first grade, wanting focused extensively on the future. The next episodes illuminate the children's visual narrations of situations that mediated their feelings and wants.

Extract 4 is an episode in which Leo, a preschooler, described how photographing himself using a mirror brought him joy.



Figure 4. I bring myself a happy feeling.

#### Extract 4

Leo: Mmm, I bring myself a happy feeling. I took a picture of myself through a mirror and after when I looked at the photo, it looked strange.

Researcher: So, you took a picture of yourself because it brings you a happy feeling. Is that so?

Leo: Yes.

Researcher: Ahaa. Yes.

Leo took a photo of himself through a mirror and described the feelings regarding this agentic activity produced in him. Playing with the camera and taking a photo of himself mediated Leo's feelings about himself and accounted for his emotional state.

Extract 5 provides Laura's narration of her photo about a clock. In this episode, Laura explained how she wanted to learn how to read time.



*Figure 5. I would like to learn how to read the time better.*

#### Extract 5

Laura, school: And then I'd like to ... I can read the time a little but I'd like to learn how to read the time better.

Researcher: Okay.

Laura took a photo of a clock. For Laura, the photo indicates that she knows how to read the time, but she would like to learn how to do it better. In the narration, she demonstrated her agency with regard to being able to improve at reading time. The notion of time is also present in her visual narration. She reflected on what she wanted in a future-oriented mode, and she contrasted the future with the present.

#### *I participate and influence*

The analysis reveals that in both the preschool and first grade settings, the children felt that there were things that they could influence and take part in. In the preschool, the children explained how that had an influence on what they could play and what they could do. In the first grade, the children described having a notebook in which they could draw and write whatever they wanted. They also explained how they had an influence on their

artwork, such as deciding what their drawing would look like and making decisions about what colors to use.

The children's narrations also described situations in which they felt they were not allowed to do something or did not feel that they had any influence. At the preschool, the children mentioned activities that were obligatory for them and that they did not have a say about these matters. In the first grade, rules and schedules were often mentioned in the children's visual narrations. Some exceptions were noted, such as the time period after lunch, as more than one child mentioned that they could sometimes choose what they wanted to do before the next lesson. Overall, in the first grade, the children's visual narrations included more examples in which the children felt they did not have an influence compared to the preschool setting. This finding was not evident in the actual number of the children's photos, as the children took a fairly equal number of photos in this modality across the settings. The children's interviews thus provided an enriched understanding of their sense of agency in the educational settings.

The next two examples illuminate the children's visual narrations of their sense of agency with regard to participation and influence in the preschool and first grade settings. The first example shows Anna explaining how she could influence her activities at the preschool.



*Figure 6. I have an influence on what I do.*

#### Extract 6

Anna, preschool: I have an influence on what I play, or you know ...

Researcher: It's about that. Ok, so you often have an influence on what you play, or do you ...?

Anna: I have an influence on, like, when we have to do silent doings [while younger children are still sleeping] so some of my silent doings what I like, like sewing, drawing, tinkering, and then I could sometimes play some board games, but I haven't really realized that yet.

Anna took a photo of the preschool classroom, which is where preschoolers that did not sleep went after reading time. Anna described the situation after reading time and the possibilities in that situation that allowed her to have influence on what she did. She felt that she could choose what to do after reading time. She felt that she had many options, including options that she had not chosen or even realized.

Extract 7 describes Laura's visual narration about her sense of influence in the first grade. Her photo is of the timetable for her first grade class.





Figure 7. I don’t have any influence on what we do in school.

#### Extract 7

Laura, school: I don’t have any influence on what we do in school.

Researcher: Mmm, can you ever decide what you do?

Laura: Well ... maybe sometimes, but I don’t remember what kind of situation that is.

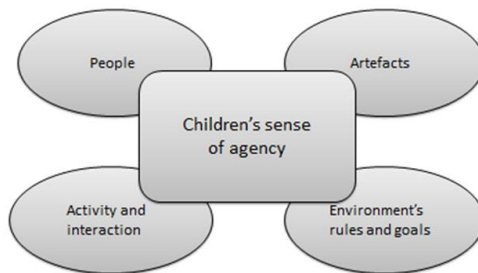
Laura took a photo of her first grade timetable in the classroom. For Laura, this picture signified that she had hardly any influence on matters at school. In her interview, she suggested that there might be a situation in which she could choose what to do, but she could not remember exactly what that situation was.

### Discussion

This study investigated the sense of agency in children across space and time based on preschool and first grade settings. In drawing on sociocultural notions of agency, the study aimed (a) to portray the modalities of the children’s sense of agency in and across preschool and first grade settings, and (b) to identify the sociocultural resources that mediated the children’s sense of agency in these two activity contexts. We sought to achieve these aims through a visual narrative inquiry, which entailed the children’s photo-

narration of their sense of agency in the preschool and then in the primary school settings. In addition, the children were observed during their photo-documentation, and they were later interviewed about their photos.

The children’s visual narrations revealed several sociocultural resources that the children identified as mediating their sense of agency in the preschool and first grade settings. In the children’s photos, material artefacts and people played an important role. Here, the people were friends, peers, teachers, other adults, and the children themselves. The material artefacts included productions, such as drawings that the children had made (either by themselves or others), toys, books, board games, and different physical spaces. The analysis of the children’s visual narratives developed during their interviews enriched the understanding of the pictures, illuminating how, in addition to the material artefacts and people, numerous rules, objectives, time-structures, and social interactions in the activity contexts mediated their sense of agency. Figure 8 below summarizes our findings regarding the sociocultural resources that mediated the children’s sense of agency (see Figure 8 below).



*Figure 8.* The sociocultural resources related to the children’s sense of agency

The findings of this study indicate the sociocultural embeddedness of the children’s sense of agency, illuminating the ways in which relational contexts, symbolic systems, and institutional practices mediate and structure children’s agency in and across preschool and first grade settings (Emirbayer & Mische, 1998). The findings demonstrate how the sense of agency is configured between the child and the social context and how it is shaped by

the rules, cultural beliefs and expectations, activities, material resources, relationships, and interactions that emerge in these contexts (Barron, 2006).

The findings indicate that the sociocultural conditions both supported and constrained the children's sense of agency in and across the two educational contexts. Moreover, the results show that the sociocultural resources identified by the children that supported their agency differed according to the educational setting, indicating discontinuities in their educational journeys across space and time. For example, opportunities for play practically disappeared from the children's visual narrations in the first grade.

The data analysis on the modalities of agency reveals that the preschool setting was experienced by the children as affording them more opportunities to feel competent and to realise their aspirations. The possibility of participating in and influencing matters was likewise more evident in the preschool setting than in the first grade setting. However, what is interesting in the children's visual narrations in this modality across the educational settings is the actual situations and activities that the children said provided opportunities to participate and influence choices. In this study, the children indicated they had an influence on matters such as choosing colors for their drawings or deciding what to do during a short break. From these accounts, it appears that there were few opportunities in either of the educational settings for real transformative agency. That is, the children were unable to take the initiative to transform their positions and to change the course of activities, even though these experiences are recognized as being pivotal in supporting the growth of children into active agents in their lives (Edwards & D'Arcy, 2004; Stetsenko, 2008, 2013). Moreover, the curriculum goal of engaging children in educational decision making was not evident in the children's visual narrations. The educational conditions necessary for children to have transformative agency clearly deserve further investigation.

The children's sense of their development was also actively negotiated in the children's visual narrations. Their own physical growth was experienced as the opening of new possibilities for agency. The physical ability to engage and interact with material objects and physical spaces was related to the embodied nature of agency (i.e., how agency manifests itself in embodied

relations to the world) (2000, 2003). Cultural expectations regarding the development of children were also identified to regulate the children's visual narrations regarding what they could do and were capable of doing. This finding is particularly relevant for education and pedagogy, as cultural expectations regarding the capabilities of children can provide encouragement and opportunities, but they can also undermine and even discourage children's sense of their agency with regard to learning and development.

The results also demonstrate that in addition to the social context and its resources, time is an important element in the children's sense of agency. The notion of time was actively negotiated in the children's visual narrations, both in situated moments and across the preschool and first grade settings. Institutional time-structures and their regulating power were also visible in the children's narrations. The children's temporal orientations to their agency were found to have different focuses in the two educational settings. In the preschool, the children's visual narrations concentrated on activities they wanted to do and on their physical development in general. In the first grade, the children's visual narrations focused more on learning something new. Here, the cultural mediation of the school context and its emphasis on learning goals becomes very visible in the children's narrations.

### **Conclusions**

The contributions of this study are both theoretical and practical. In terms of theory, the study sheds light on the sociocultural underpinnings of the children's agency in two educational contexts, demonstrating the interplay between culture- and context-specific processes and agency. It illuminates how agency is operationalized at the intersection of two activity systems, and thus how paying attention to the construction, negotiation, and maintenance of agency can offer spaces for intervention and for understanding the sociocultural conditions for agency. Attention to the details of social contexts and their perceived resources will enable us to understand how agency is socially constructed and how this mediates, and even determines, the educational engagement and learning of children. As this study shows visual narrative inquiry offers a potential methodology for

attending and listening to children, especially in terms of their sense of agency across space and time.

In a practical sense, understanding the sociocultural processes and conditions that mediates the children's sense of their agency provides ways of modifying school ecologies and classroom practices to empower every child and ensure meaningful educational engagement and a positive start to school. Recognizing the sociocultural resources underlying agency in the everyday life of the classroom is vital to proactively promote children's engagement, learning, and wellbeing (Kumpulainen et al., 2013). These findings are also pivotal in understanding how to support children's positive transition to school. In Finland, there are many knowledge exchange practices between institutions and adults that support educational engagement and positive school transitioning for children. However, as this study reveals, it is also important to recognize the actual sociocultural settings, and their social conditions and resources, that mediate children's agency in and across educational settings.

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