

## Nurturing agentic children in early childhood education: thinking about children’s agency with a childhood studies lens.

Phoebe Tong | New Zealand Tertiary College

Early childhood practitioners in Aotearoa New Zealand are guided by a vision of children as competent and confident learners in the national early childhood curriculum *Te Whāriki* (Ministry of Education 2017). This vision reflects an assumption of children’s agency which has been the subject of discussion in early childhood education and childhood studies. In this article, the meaning of children’s agency is discussed through a childhood studies lens. Childhood studies as a discipline and its key tenets in examining knowledge of children and childhood as socially constructed will be briefly introduced. The meaning of children’s agency will be further unpacked through a sociological perspective. Two themes from childhood studies in relation to children’s agency, the relational approach to agency and notions of *being* and *becoming*, will be discussed to explore pedagogical possibilities for realising children’s agency in early childhood settings. This article makes practical recommendations for early childhood practitioners to nurture agentic children in a relational way, embracing both notions of being and becoming.

### Introduction

It is stated in *Te Whāriki: He Whāriki Mātauranga mō ngā Mokopuna o Aotearoa: Early Childhood Curriculum (Te Whāriki)* (Ministry of Education [MoE], 2017, the national early childhood curriculum in Aotearoa New Zealand, that underpinning this curriculum is the vision that “children are competent and confident learners and communicators, healthy in mind, body and spirit, secure in their sense of belonging and in the knowledge that they make a valued contribution to society” (MoE, 2017, p. 6). This image of the child as someone who contributes to society relates to a central topic in childhood studies, children’s agency. Traditionally, agency is associated with adults due to their capacities to be rational and their biological maturity but this notion is contested in childhood studies allowing children the ability to influence their individual being and the collective lives of all (Tesar, 2016). Therefore, the childhood studies lens is significant for understanding children’s agency.

The development of the idea of children’s agency can be seen in the 1970s when a more agentic view of children as active people rather than passive subjects began to emerge in childhood sociology (Gallacher & Kehily, 2013). This view of children is stated in one of the key principles that was later summarised for this emerging paradigm shift in studying children and childhood:

children are and must be seen as active in the construction and determination of their own social lives, the lives of those around them and of the societies in which

they live. Children are not just the passive subjects of social structures and processes. (Prout & James, 1997, p. 8)

Children's active contribution to the shaping of their social worlds and society is highlighted meaning that children are re-conceptualised as people (like adults) who can have power and agency to control their own experiences and contribute to society.

In *Te Whāriki Online*, children's agency is defined as "a learner's sense of control in a given situation. A learner with agency feels capable of influencing their own learning and acting to accomplish their goals" (MoE, n.d., para. 4). This sense of control also relates to the te ao Māori value of mana, "the power of being, authority, prestige, spiritual power, authority, status, and control" (MoE, 2017, p. 66). In Aotearoa New Zealand, constructions of childhood have changed in the recent years (Smith, 2013). Childhood used to be "a time of vulnerability, need for protection and socialisation by adult demands" (Smith, 2013, p. 65). Now professionals and researchers are prompted to transform their approaches, seeing the world from the children's perspective, respecting children's competence and voice, giving them opportunities to problem solve, and treating them as competent and active citizens so that "they are likely to *be* competent and active" (Smith, 2013, p. 66).

In general, it is recognised that the idea of agency allows children "transformative power" to have "influence on their lives...[and] on the conditions of any structure of societal" (Tesar, 2016, p. 4). However, a concern about the idea of agency being taken for granted remains, asking a question of "how much 'real' agency and capacity children have to effect change" (Wyness, 2012, as cited in Tesar, 2016, p. 4). To continue extending the positive influence of the idea of children's agency in early childhood education reality, this article aims to provoke a deeper engagement with the idea of children's agency using a childhood studies lens. I will begin with a brief introduction of childhood studies as a discipline. Children's agency will be conceptualised from a sociological perspective. Two themes from childhood studies, the relational agency and the being and becoming discourse, will be discussed with practical suggestions to practitioners.

### **Childhood studies**

Childhood studies is an open and inter-disciplinary field (Tesar, 2016) that provides ideas and understanding about childhood, drawing on a range of disciplines, such as sociology, philosophy, anthropology, history and education. What unites all the disciplines together in childhood studies is a "new sociology of childhood" with a paradigmatic shift from the biological understanding of children's immaturity to the socially-constructed nature of children and childhood (Tesar, 2016, p.2). The biological immaturity of childhood is not denied; rather the emphasis is on how "this immaturity is understood and made meaningful" (Prout & James, 2015, p.6).

The seminal scholars in this field, Prout and James (1997), state that:

Childhood is understood as a social construction. As such it provides an interpretive frame for contextualising the early years of human life. Childhood, as distinct from biological immaturity is neither a natural nor a universal feature of

human groups, but appears as a specific structural and cultural component of many societies. (p. 8)

Sociologists Prout and James' (1997) 'new paradigm' of childhood (at the time) formed the basis of a movement that is referred to as the new social studies for childhood (Gallacher & Kehily, 2013). Prout and James had the intention to influence the way in which childhood was approached, so it was not subordinated to adulthood, and to ensure that children's learning and interests were attended to for who they were, rather than solely for their relevance to the adults they would become (Gallacher & Kehily, 2013). The view of a developmental child as a universally and naturally growing young human being to gain rationality and biological maturity, underpinned by developmental psychology was challenged and a new view of the child as a competent social agent was advocated (Prout & James, 1997).

When the developmental psychology's interpretation of childhood is recognised as disciplinary knowledge and one interpretative framework rather than universal knowledge, childhood studies has the transformative power to liberate academics and scholars from one framework to alternative and multiple frameworks of knowing and theorising childhood and children (Tesar, 2016). For example, taking an anthropological perspective, children's lived experiences are highlighted and thus childhood diversity can be recognised through people's lived experiences (Montgomery, 2013). Philosophers' visions of children and childhood also has a critical role in shaping adults' thoughts and behaviour towards children and these visions can be seen in Locke's view of children as blank slates, Rousseau's romantic view of children's innocence, and so on (Tesar, 2016).

Early childhood practitioners can delve deeper into their interpretations and knowledge of children and childhood and trace this knowledge back to theories, their personal experiences, and the historical and sociocultural context in which the knowledge is constructed. The way that adults have thought about what children are and how they should be treated is critically analysed by childhood studies scholars (Montgomery, n.d.). These adult-framed ideas affect how we (adults) behave towards the children and thus shape the children's experiences of being a child and their engagement with the world (Gallacher & Kehily, 2013). For example, Sorin and Galloway (2006) created a typology of ten images of child. They believe that each construction of childhood through the image of child also constructs the adulthood and their interactions with children. By viewing the child as innocent, the adult becomes the protector. The ten constructions are: the child as innocent - adult as protector; the child as evil - adult as good or moral; the snowballing child - the deferring adult; the out-of-control child - the ineffectual adult; the noble or saviour child - the dependent adult; the miniature adult - the adult; the adult-in-training - the teacher; the commodified child - the self-interested adult; the child as victim - the absent adult; the agentic child - co-constructor of being. This typology shows one way that adults could critically inquire into commonly shared notions of children and childhood and the impact of these notions on adult-child and teacher-learner interactions. It is also useful for practitioners to reflect on where their knowledge of child agency comes from and how this knowledge informs their practice.

### ***Children's Agency***

In this article, children's agency will be conceptualised from a sociological perspective. In defining the term, James and James (2012) suggest that agency is "the capacity of individuals to act independently" (p. 3). The concept of

agency can be traced back to a traditional debate in sociological studies about social structure and the human agency (James & James, 2012).

This debate, in essence, [is] a struggle to evaluate the competing claims made [in sociological theories] about the extent to which individuals can act independently of the social structures, institutions and value systems that make up the societies in which they live. (James & James, 2012, p. 4)

It means that agency is about human power, actions and impacts, and as argued by sociologist Anthony Giddens (1979, as cited in James & James, 2012), agency must be understood in relation to structure and these two concepts (agency and structure) cannot be taken as stand-alone. Social structure provides the framework through which people act and interact with one another. In the meantime, people's actions can shape and reshape social structure (Giddens, 1979, as cited in James & James, 2012).

According to the 'new' sociology of childhood, children's agency is about having control over their own lives and taking some part in the changes and agenda happening in society (James & James, 2012). Two terms are highlighted when describing children's agency in childhood studies, being *active* and being a *social actor*. The emphasis on *active*, challenges the issue of marginalising children which ignores children's unique perspectives, and considers children to lack competence, rationality, independence, and experience (Smith, 2013). As agentic people, children can act and make a difference "to a relationship, a decision, to the workings of a set of social assumptions or constraints" (Mayall, 2002, p. 21). The social actor emphasis also reflects the structure and agency debate in sociology (Giddens as discussed above). Children should have the capacity to act with agency to not only enact a change that has positive effects for themselves, but also "the society and the planet" (Tesar, 2016, p. 4).

It is important to ensure that children's agency is not only seen in theory. Next, I will explore *how* early childhood professionals can actualise children's agency in practice. The concept of children's agency will be further unpacked through two themes, the relational approach to child's agency and the notion of being and becoming. It is hoped that this further unpacking will provoke a deeper engagement with this concept and more thoughts about what enables children's agency in early childhood education.

### ***Nurturing children's agency: a relational approach to children's agency***

An examination of the relational and individualistic approaches to agency is helpful for practitioners working on enabling children's agency. Children's agency is often viewed as an attribute that children possess independently (Gallacher & Kehily, 2013). This independent relationship of children's agency and their surroundings shows an individualistic approach to agency that was seen as over romanticised (Wyness, 2015). From a social and relational perspective, on the other hand, the emphasis is on the contexts and relationships within which children's agency is embedded and developed (Lee, 2001; Wyness, 2015). Wyness (2015) problematises the individualistic approach and argues that the individualistic conceptualisation of children's agency could be too romanticised representing a "search for the unmediated adult-free voice of the child" (Hart, 1997; Franklin, 1997, as cited in Wyness, 2015, p. 24). An authentic pure voice from children, minimal adult involvement is assumed. From a relational viewpoint, children's

agency should be nurtured and actualised rather than assumed. “Children’s voices are always mediated or arising out of ongoing dialogue with others” (Wyness, 2015, p. 29). Using a relational approach, children’s agency, capacities and dispositions to express their perspectives and influence their environments rely on others (including other children, teachers, and parents). An agentic and mana-enhancing environment and relationship are key.

In *Te Whāriki*, it is noted that children learn through relationships with people, places, and things (MoE, 2017). A similar emphasis on people, things and places for children’s agency can be understood with Lee’s (2001) study. Lee (2001) suggests that agency should be seen as dependency, meaning that children’s abilities to act depend on their surroundings – the networks of connections and associations between actors of all kinds including humans and non-humans. Thus, an agentic and mana-enhancing environment should take into account the whole learning environment including the physical environment, the interpersonal environment, the learning experiences, the way learning resources are made accessible or inaccessible to the children, and so on. As children’s interactions with people, places and things are dynamic and fluid, a regular evaluation of the mana-enhancing learning environment by kaiako is necessary. Meanwhile, a relational approach also recognises children’s moral agency, including children’s responsibility-taking for themselves and others (Wyness, 2015) and this emphasis on responsibility taking as agency can be recognised in practitioners’ curriculum planning and assessment.

### ***Nurturing children’s current and future agency: Being and Becoming***

It is also important for teachers who work with children’s agency to draw on both the *being* and *becoming* conceptualisations of children and this means that teachers could consider what children’s agency means for their current and future lives. The debate of being and becoming is central to childhood studies (Uprichard, 2008). The *being* child refers to the present state of being a child who could actively construct their childhood, contribute to the societies in which one lives in, and has views and lived experiences about being a child (Prout & James, 1997; Uprichard, 2008). The *becoming* child is future-oriented as the ‘adult-in-the-making’ who will learn skills and features of the ‘adult’ that they will become (Jenks, 1996). This future-oriented view of children as adults-to-be was criticised by scholars as the new social studies of childhood emerged (Gallacher & Kehily, 2013). Children were advocated for “beings in their own right rather than pre-adult becomings” (Holloway & Valentine, 2000, p. 5).

Although this counter narrative (being children) to becoming adults was seen as a useful strategy at the time, now more attention is given to the issues with the binary opposition of being and becoming (Gallacher & Kehily, 2013). Uprichard (2008) problematises the polarisation of the being and becoming debate. She argues that children’s agency should be in both the present and future:

The ‘being and becoming’ discourse extends the notion of agency offered by the ‘being’ discourse to consider the child as a social actor constructing his or her everyday life and the world around them, both in the present and the future. (Uprichard, 2008, p. 311)

Therefore, children’s agency should be viewed in terms of making decisions about their present-beings as well as the capacity to imagine alternative possibilities towards the future which could be enabled by practitioners through a relational approach.

It is useful to unpack what kind of early childhood practices support the being and becoming discourse. Preparing children for the future and for school can be viewed as supporting the becoming child. Practices that reflect the present state of being could be associated with a child's current wellbeing and emotions, temporal thoughts that might evolve later, uninterrupted play and the state of flow, their current and immediate needs, time to relax, think and wonder, and so on. Taking leisure time as an example, it is stated by United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989) "that every child has the right to rest and leisure, to engage in play and recreational activities appropriate to the age of the child and to participate freely in cultural life and the arts" (Article 31). In an early childhood setting, such leisure time could mean quality time for children to relax and wonder, that is important for their wellbeing now.

It is also beneficial to examine a teacher's image of the child as a confident and competent learner (MoE, 2017) in association with the being and becoming discourse. To trust a child's current abilities to learn could hold different meanings to working towards developing them as a confident and competent learner in the future. When children are seen as a competent learner already (now), it opens the possibility for teachers to challenge their assumptions about how much the children can learn and thus teachers are more likely to respond with complex learning opportunities. Moreover, not all the children come with an equal level of confidence and competence, so teachers play a critical role in growing the children's confidence and competence to afford them the opportunity to become more agentic as time goes by.

The relational approach to agency highlights the dependency of children's agency on their surroundings. The role of teachers is forefronted in nurturing and enabling children to be agentic and to become more agentic. To realise children's agency means to create an empowering and mana-enhancing environment where all (people, places, and things) are involved. Furthermore, the being and becoming discourse is valuable for practitioners to work with children's current and future agency. In the following, I make recommendations for early childhood practitioners drawing on these two themes discussed above and my practicing experiences as a teacher and teacher educator in Aotearoa New Zealand.

#### ***Teaching practices to support children's agency in a relational way:***

- Treat children as competent and active citizens so that they are more likely to be competent and active (Smith, 2013; Sorin & Galloway, 2006). Give children trust in their capabilities. Observe attentively to decide when teacher guidance and intervention are needed or not needed.
- Early childhood teachers could critically reflect on their perspectives of children and childhood. What constructs of childhood (from Sorin & Galloway, 2006) can they see in their practice, and how might that idea construct their role as a teacher and thus shape their teaching practices? Consider specific societal factors that privilege certain kinds of childhood as 'ideal' or 'perfect', for example, the influence of consumerism that privileges a material-rich childhood (Wolff, 2013).
- Encourage children to share their ideas in various ways (verbal, non-verbal, and artistic). Develop children's self-confidence and positive self-esteem through affirmations.
- Check and evaluate the learning environment to see if children have access to choose toys and resources. For example, check if the children can select picture books to read. For infants and toddlers, it might be helpful to



- give the children access to nappies to afford them the opportunities to learn about their needs and learn to tell the teachers if they need a nappy change.
- Provide children the opportunity to revisit their learning journey. Check and ensure that the children have access to documentations (their artworks, learning blurbs, wall displays) and their learning portfolios (or learning stories). Although online platforms for learning stories/documentations are widely used, it is important to ensure that children have access to the documentations (online or hardcopy) too so that they can see, read, and comment.
  - Ensure the centre's routine is created in a way that values children's choices and decision making. Consider a balance to include both the children's agenda and the teachers' needs to maintain a healthy work rhythm for all people's wellbeing.
  - For moral agency, engage children in morality discussions prompted by stories, such as what is right and wrong, and why. The 'Jack and the beanstalk' story is a good example for prompting children to think about Jack's intention and outcomes, and children can be encouraged to openly share their perspectives. Discuss what it means to take responsibility and care for others (human and non-human beings).
  - Foster a mana-enhancing environment where children are encouraged to make decisions and take agentic roles so that they could influence other children to do so too. Involve children in a shared problem-solving process. Teachers could think together with them rather than jumping too quickly to a conclusion.

***Teaching practices to support balanced teaching practices for both "being" and "becoming":***

- To reflect on the teacher's intention: is the pedagogical decision making made towards 'becoming' to prepare the child for future with sufficient consideration of the child 'being' an actor of their life now?
- To reflect on the centre's curriculum: how much weight is given to the 'being' child in the centre's curriculum? For example, is there a time/activity designed in a daily routine that aims at benefiting children's wellbeing in the current 'being' state?
- Provide opportunities for the children and teachers to imagine new possibilities together. Acknowledge the limitation of what we know and how much we can know about the future. Knowing that we do not know enough about the future with humbleness will open a space for imagining what could be otherwise (Greene, 1988). Children can be encouraged to think about complex and simple issues together with teachers in a child-friendly way (such as understanding sustainability and climate change through drawing, dramatic play, storytelling, and so on).
- Select children's literature intentionally with a critical awareness of the construction of childhood in the story. Consider how the story about childhood might potentially shape children's thoughts about who they are and who they want to become. For example, Disney Princess stories are often discussed for the impact of these stories in creating stereotypical and non-stereotypical gender roles and gendered behaviour (England et al., 2011; Golden & Jacoby, 2018).
- Pay attention to what the child wants to achieve, who they want to become, and create an enabling environment so that the child will have opportunities to work on their goals (big and small goals). Acknowledge that this is their current aspiration which might change and evolve over time. Consider the family's background and experiences that contribute to a shared vision of who this child wants to become in the future.

- For transitions (transitioning to another room, transitioning to school), consider how the transitioning plan embraces the child’s needs “here and now” as well as in the new environment. Their current needs are as important as their future needs and both needs should be catered for.

In conclusion, early childhood practitioners play a crucial role in realising children’s agency in early childhood settings. I acknowledge the ongoing academic discussion around agency and children’s agency. There are a lot more approaches and theories in this discussion that are not covered in this article. It is not my intention to offer a comprehensive literature review on childhood studies and children’s agency. The purpose of this article is to extend the influence of childhood studies in early childhood education with a practitioner focus on addressing how children’s agency can be understood and then actualised. Childhood studies as a newly emerged and active discipline is introduced. This article primarily draws on the sociological perspective to conceptualise children’s agency. Children’s agency as relational and constructed through both the being and becoming discourses are highlighted for pedagogical considerations. The recommended teaching practices are influenced by my experiences as a teacher, teacher educator and researcher. It is hoped that future discussions around children’s agency in relation to early childhood pedagogy will continue to be fruitful. It will be beneficial for more practitioners to contribute to this ever-growing field of children’s agency and childhood studies.



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