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How the Implementation of Children's Agency Impacts their Academic Attainment and Holistic Development Within their Educational Environment

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Abstract

The aim of this piece of research is to understand how teachers implement children's autonomy in their educational settings, and its impact on their holistic development. This research project is an empirical study that used a non-probability snowball sample of two semi-structured interviews of early childhood teachers and 10 observations of 10 children aged 4 within a preschool nursery setting. This research employed a mixed-method research design in an interpretivist paradigm. The results of this research indicate that agency within childhood settings is facilitated in several ways, including the incorporation of child interest and the promotion of child-led activities. However, the role of agency within educational settings can be impacted by pressures teaching staff face to obtain high academic success within settings. The role of agency is also limited by the question of who the teacher is working alongside, as parent/carer partnerships interject with the expression of agentic behaviours for children within the nursery setting.

Keywords: children's agency, academic attainments, holistic development, childhood



Introduction

This research project, aims to investigate the influence that agency has on the academic attainment of children within early years education. Researchers such as Karimi (2024) observe a shift within the field of teaching. The prioritisation of children's needs and interests and the adoption of freedom within educational delivery systems have facilitated the promotion of child-led and child-centred approaches within the classroom of today.

Agency is not a new phenomenon; researchers such as Jerome (2022) conceptualise agency as the capacity to act and do things according to free will. The research conducted within this project is important as it contributes to a historic battle within the field of childhood education. Power (2018) articulates that classroom debates between the correct level of child-led learning opportunities, balanced alongside adult-led activities, have sparked the interest of early childhood academic researchers. Power (2018) implies new research claims towards progressive visions of improved educational delivery approaches, and teaching techniques best suited towards the interests of the child, are based on the level of agentic opportunities they are enabled within their learning journey.

I would like to investigate this research topic by asking research questions such as how the inclusion of a child's interests and the incorporation of children's voices into the day-to-day classroom impacts their holistic development and their educational attainment. This research aims to provide educational staff and future academic researchers a viewpoint on the impacting factors that may influence the level of agency within the classroom, such as teachers understanding the promotion of a 'pedagogic voice' in educational environments benefits children cognitive capacity to understand how to implement their voice, and facilitating the inclusion of this voice within decision-making processes during the school day, neutralises the power dynamic within the classroom (Sainz et al, 2024). The specific aim of this research is to understand how teachers implement children's autonomy in their educational settings, and its impact on their holistic development.

The following research project aims to investigate and contribute towards recent childcare educational debates by providing an answer to the following questions,

1. How much agency do children have for their own educational outcomes?
2. How is the individual child's choice incorporated into their lesson plan?
3. How does the inclusion of each child's interests and likes impact their educational development?

To conclude, this research aims to contribute towards the debate between the level of child-led teaching opportunities, compared to adult-led activities that augment the opportunity for children to express their own agency within the setting, and how the chosen methodology permits the true authenticity, validity and objectivity of this research project, by adopting a critical and self-reflective lens during the totality of the research timeline.

Literature Review

The purpose of this literature review is to understand and critically examine how teaching staff implement and facilitate children's autonomous learning opportunities within their educational environments. This chapter also aims to interrogate relevant literature that critically engages and explores how high-quality autonomous learning can either benefit or hinder holistic development, as well as educational outcomes, by reviewing current literature that highlights how teaching staff who enable agentic behaviours from their students impact their educational outcomes.

In addition to a review of how agency impacts educational attainment, this literature research investigates how the inclusion of children's choice and voice becomes embedded into teaching programmes, and

the influence that incorporating the interests and likes of a child has on these educational outcomes. This literature review ends with a consideration of how my own positionality stance has changed from interacting with current research towards autonomous learning and children's agency in learning environments.

Many key researchers within the field of early childhood education, such as Manyukhina (2021), define children's agency in educational institutions as the compromise of three different elements. The capacity to act means an individual's belief in their ability to make independent choices, combined with an educational setting that encourages the capability to make informed decisions, allowing the child to become conscious of their own legitimate right to exercise agency.

The acquisition of agency opportunities within the educational setting is recognised by Hasstrom (2022) as a key component of a Rationale Pedagogy. The ideology that if educators enhance children's chances to express their agency in a sustainable manner, an authentic relationship between teacher and child will emerge, and encourage a more successful academic outcome for both the pupil and the educator. Harris (2019) recognises that educational outcomes are the measurement of how successful a student's understanding of educational content has been. The pressure that teaching staff undergo to achieve a substantial rate of academic achievement can directly influence the nature of agency-based teaching that can take place in the learning environment.

Research by Shaw (2020) recognises the importance of teaching staff using strategies that elevate visual methods of teaching, particularly with children in early years, as Shaw believes that visual tools enable children in early years to widen their individual perception of matters that impact them. The introduction of visual prompts such as 'photo-voice' technology, which lets children record their own meanings to photographs, can enable children to express their own opinions and thoughts in their educational setting. The introduction of such technology, alongside the implementation of Hasstrom's (2019) Rationale Pedagogy, can alleviate the pressures teaching staff face to ensure their pupils reach high academic success and additionally meet criteria Manyukhina (2021) identifies as necessary, to create an optimal educational environment that encourages children's agency.

Building upon this point, Scarparolo (2022) has identified that facilitating opportunities for children's voice in their classrooms is not only in line with the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child Act 1989 but also encourages children to have a more successful learning experience by pushing them to become more motivated to learn. The advocacy that children can become more included in items such as lesson planning and the delivery of education can bolster participation and engagement (Osae & Papadopoulos, 2024; Papadopoulos, 2020; Papadopoulos, 2021; Papadopoulos & Bisiri, 2020; Papadopoulos & Shin, 2021). Thus, enforcing the notion that the more agency opportunities educators provide for children, the more their educational attainment will be greatly impacted.

In actual application of this thematic perspective, Mitchell (2014) highlights that while constructive of rights-based pedagogy, self-regulated learning can hinder classroom management and prevent academic success. Mitchell (2014) identifies several issues that can occur and lead children with a lesser cognitive capacity to become overwhelmed and show lower levels of determination. However, to combat this, Boardman (2022) argues that limiting agency opportunities for children with lesser cognitive capacity impinges on both their rights as human being, but also damages learning opportunities. To ensure true educational attainment and advocate a rights-based pedagogy, a proper learning environment must facilitate a balance of both adult-led and child-initiated learning styles.

Jerome and Starkey (2022) proclaim that teaching staff must implement a Children's Rights Education (CRE) framework into their learning environments, as it is inspired by the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child Act 1989. The framework ensures that decision-making processes can be achieved by children, as teachers utilize the curriculum to cultivate a pathway for autonomous learning. Building upon this, O'Sullivan (2023) encapsulates the notion that adopting a distributed leadership style in classrooms enhances CRE as it facilitates a more collaborative teaching structure and alters routine education to amplify decision-making opportunities in learning atmospheres.

While Humphrey (2020) recognises that distributed leadership facilitates teaching staff to distribute accountability and responsibility for the educational attainment of their pupils, a critical perspective of this concept expresses drawbacks in its succession. Humphrey (2020) provides a closer analysis that distributed leadership strategies shape students to comply and propel power dynamic issues into the classroom, and dismisses opportunities for children to reach true agency in their decision-making processes. Suggesting that a true autonomous learning environment is created by a mutual trust and commitment from both the educator and the learning participant.

Despite the magnitude of research conducted regarding agency-based teaching and its impact on decision-making processes for children in learning facilities, Forg and Samuelsson (2022) highlight a concerning lack of recognition of the question of how sustainable these teaching systems genuinely are, especially towards early years practitioners and early years settings. Forg and Samuelsson (2022) found that while early years practitioners understand teaching to be inclusive of children's agency, and provide as many occasions as possible for children to become agent of their own learning, this should be in goal-oriented activities as practitioners bear the full responsibility for educational attainment in these types of learning facilities.

Nevertheless, De Sousa (2019) rebuts this idea and narrates that pedagogy in participation is fundamental to the individual child's voice in the setting, and that it is imperative for both teachers and early years educators to integrate decision-making opportunities into learning facilities, to anchor a rights-based pedagogy to create an autonomous educational environment. However, Koivula (2019) interludes that as the individual child ventures through their educational journey, diverse teaching strategies are needed from each teaching staff member that the child endeavours. The greater acquisition of cognitive capacity that students achieve, increased opportunities for decision-making should arise, as agency needs differ according to the stage of development each child is in. The teaching strategies should become more diverse and comply with all children's autonomy needs as per each stage of development.

In actual application of agency support, the inclusion of decision-making opportunities for children in their learning environments is key. Archambault et al (2020) insist that higher quality teaching promotes children's agency in feasible and sustainable ways. Creating secure relationships with each child impacts educational attainment and lessens challenges such as classroom behavioural issues. Archambault et al (2020) promote the understanding that engaging with the child's interest, for example, is a sustainable tool that educators introduce into educational content to encourage participation and learning. As the creation of a power structure that is configured by teachers but incorporates pupil perspectives, will prevail to create a successful educational institution and offer a CRE framework.

High-quality provision practices that include children's personal interests in their educational opportunities, benefit their educational attainment in a positive and rights-based manor that empowers both individual children's voice and choice. Martinez-Sainz et al (2024) articulate that this practice is grounded in the 'sociology of pedagogic voice' and is the foundation for a rights-based teaching strategy. Subsequently, Martinez-Sainz et al (2024) illustrate that teaching staff facilitating opportunities for children's voices, positively impact learning processes as the inclusion of children's decision-making contributed towards school improvement. Fostering children's voice and choice in educational opportunities, such as free play, enables teaching staff to identify barriers to learning, such as presence and participation (Martinez-Sains, 2024)

Contrary to Martienz- Sainez, Rantala et al (2019) concurs that the adoption of free play and agency-related practices may unconsciously push children into socially constructed gendered activities, which impacts their educational outcomes as it limits true agency due to gender roles becoming embedded into child-teacher social interactions in this capacity (Osae & Papadopoulos, 2024; Papadopoulos, 2020, 2021; Papadopoulos & Bisiri, 2020; Papadopoulos & Shin, 2021). Rantala et al (2019) research highlights how unconscious teachers reinforce 'gender-coded' activities as well as pivot children into gender stere-

otypical activities during free play, which limits educational attainment as it constricts children's subject or resource choice.

Notwithstanding the fact that gender imposes a barrier towards children's educational outcomes, Nolan et al (2021) challenge the notion previously identified by conceding how professional development programmes are undertaken by teaching staff, to continually improve their pedagogical knowledge and augment social attitudes, practices, and skills. Thus, highlighting free play as a 'vehicle for learning' contributes greatly towards children's educational outcomes in a positive manner, such as encouraging problem-solving skills and developing cognitive functions. Nolan et al (2021) enforce the idea that teachers are the conductors of learning and must facilitate, support, and scaffold play, as well as apply a critical lens towards their pedagogy, to ensure the eradication of barriers to learning, due to their own positionality.

Lundy et al (2024) emphasize the value that educators implementing a child's rights-based approach have, when conducting learning prospects in scholarly settings. Educating staff who understand the holistic benefit of supporting children's participatory rights and promote the interpretation of them in learning environments, not only meet the legal rights of the child, as per the United Nations Conventions on the Rights of the Child Act 1989, but comprehend and empower the notion that 'children are the experts of their own learning'. (Lundy et al, 2024).

Providing the capacity for children to share their views and opinions will provide a high volume of evidence on academic success of children in their educational attainment. To conclude, Armani et al (2024) finalise the concept that a balanced learning setting will create a harmonious balance between facilitating a 'children-centred approach' and 'teaching staff directing and activating learning' in a space that empowers children and creates a dimension of active learning that enables both guided teaching and independent learning.

The access I have gained from being a university student to a large breadth of research and resources has enabled me to adopt a bricolage viewpoint that layers both feminist and critical standpoints. Conducting this research has highlighted how my own intersectional labels, such as being a white British female has shaped my positionality. I note a high volume of research papers and resources I have used are based on male bodies of work within Westernised areas of the world, such as Europe and the Americas. However, White (2011) notes that African feminists' literature and research remain intertwined with public debates and political struggles due to a patriarchal oppressive system. To bring integrity to my thinking rational I need to be aware and open, considering the privileges I have as a young white woman in academia within the Westernised world. Understanding I have access to a globalised body of resources within this field and ensuring I immerse myself within this global body of academic research.

My independent research will focus on ideologies of autonomous learning being significant towards the development of educational attainment, as researchers such as Shaw (2020) have argued that 'whilst the importance of engaging with children's voices is now more widely recognised, there is still a dearth of representation of younger children's voices specifically'. I believe my research will contribute to this research gap as it investigates how teaching pedagogy can affect children's voice and agency in the classroom. This research will contribute towards the emerging theme that although agency is a basic human right within the educational space, it is not treated as such, and additional pressures teachers face impact the level of agency they can provide to children within the setting. To conclude, I believe that my research will highlight the importance of teaching staff providing an autonomous learning environment, as it enables children to become immersed in an enabling environment that positively impacts their educational outcomes in a sustainable fashion.

Methodology

In this chapter, I will discuss the methodology rationale that outlines the design choices and discuss the matters that impact the subjectivity, validity, and reliability of my research project.

I will be pairing my interpretivist paradigm with a qualitative approach. This form of research paradigm and approach enables me to adopt an inductive lens towards analysing my accumulated data. The use of an interpretivist paradigm and qualitative approach alongside social research data collection methods, such as observations, will allow me to undertake a thematic approach when conducting a deep analysis of the gathered information once complete. The incorporation of an interpretivist paradigm, a qualitative approach, and a thematic data analysis enables my research to have a mixed method purpose. Denscombe (2021) frames mixed method research purposes as the comparison of a phenomenon, such as the concept of agency, and combining it with the aspect of other strategies, such as teaching delivery methods. I have chosen this research purpose as it provides the opportunity to gain more accurate data and explore the same subject from different viewpoints.

Research of this nature requires a sample. I will be using a non-probability sampling technique. This sample technique is most suited to me due to the limited time, expense, and ability to gain willing participants. This facilitates the opportunity for me to gain appropriate and meaningful data on such impactful factors. Clark (2019) notes that non-probability sampling techniques contain snowball samples. Clark (2019) articulates a snowball sample as a sample of convenience that enables a researcher to pick participants who may be hard to locate or participate in the project. Snowball sample techniques are purposeful towards my research project, as I will be recruiting children and educational staff from a small network of children within one setting, compared to multiple settings or larger areas. I will be recruiting the participants who give their legal written consent from a small educational community within a nursery and preschool setting for children ages 0-5. I will be observing the children who are in the preschool classroom and interviewing two early childhood teachers with the data collection tool of a semi-structured interview and observations of the classrooms.

Data collection tools such as semi-structured interviews are the most beneficial forms of interviews, as they enable a structure to guide data towards a specific outcome, yet allow a freedom of expression from the participant to provide additional information (Thomas, 2023). The decision to pair this with observations that are structured has enabled me, as a researcher, to watch the natural and social world, and has enabled me to gain raw data that is suitable for the needs of my research project.

The engagement of such forms of methodology has supported my research into my chosen topic, as Mayne (2018) notes that agency and power within research projects are dependent on adult agendas. The capacity of research undertaken should practice precautions to incorporate children's rights and voice within the overall research design (Mayne, 2018). The consideration of children's agentic behaviours is at the forefront of my research methodology, as it intertwines the ideology of my research topic within my own research techniques. This permits my research project to work alongside children at their own capacity, empowering their agency, voice, and choice during the research timeline, supporting the power balance, validity, and authenticity of my research, and limiting upcoming challenges (Mayne, 2018).

The application of different forms of my chosen methodology and data collection methods may present potential challenges during my research process. Bell (2018) identifies the challenges of using observations as they lack precise quantifiable measures that may encourage the bias of a researcher due to the impressionistic nature of observation. The process of immersing myself within the educational setting to obtain my data may cause the children to change the way they behave and produce different accounts of data, compared to the true processes that may happen within day-to-day activities in the setting. To combat these limitations, I conducted a pilot test of my observational techniques during my placement to ensure the children were comfortable with my presence during my time gathering information and data.

The practical reality of conducting my data collection methods supplied additional challenges, which I did not consider when choosing my research methodology processes. Recruiting willing participants for interviews was deemed to be an unseen challenge, as staff within the setting did not want to be interviewed due to a consensus of feeling judged by me. To combat this issue, I explained in more detail

about the thematic approach I would take towards my data analysis, meaning I would be linking their knowledge and data as evidence and responses towards themes I had identified within my literature research (Bell, 2018). This helped me to gather two willing participants for my interviews, alongside the use of self-reflective accounts to modify my behaviour to be as neutral as possible.

To conclude this chapter, I will note how my choice of methodology has enabled my research to be valid and reliable. Qualitative data ensures credible data, as Denscombe (2021) articulates that this form of data is valid due to the gathering of precise and relevant data towards the identified research topic, and reliable as it relies on the grounds of ensuring research tools are neutral in their use and not swayed by personal bias or opinion. The use of pilot tests and the process of self-reflection permitted the obstruction of challenges and risks towards my data collection. This benefits the subjectivity, validity, and reliability of my research, and has facilitated the opportunity for me to gain an authentic account of information during this research project, so I would have credible data to pair with my extensive literature reviews to create a rich process of data that answers my research questions and aims.

Ethical Considerations

In this chapter, I will discuss the ethical considerations taken during this research project. Clark et al (2019) articulate ethics as a philosophical practice that sets a moral standard of behaviour, respect, conduct, and principles within the field of data collection and research. It is critical that ethics are always respected during research programmes as these principles set a moral and legal rationale for research subjects, as well as researchers.

A vital ethical consideration is the principle of confidentiality. Cohen et al (2018) express that the essence of confidentiality is to create a mutual faith and trust between researcher and participant to allow data to be anonymous and authentic. During my research, I carried out my obligations of confidentiality with the use of pseudonyms during observations of children, and any collected data was stored within a password-protected device, to which only I had access. I also followed the General Data Protection Regulations when collecting and storing data from my participant interviews to ensure total confidentiality and anonymity throughout my research project.

I conducted further principles to observe additional ethical considerations during my research project using informed consent. To ensure this ethical procedure, I curated a participant information sheet that outlined who I was, my research questions and aims, as well as participant rights such as the right to withdraw from voluntary participation at any time, and my up-to-date contact details. I provided this document to the parents and carers of the children who participated to gain written legal consent.

The use of informed consent was vital towards extra ethical principles, such as understanding and respecting the hierarchy of the gatekeeper during my research. Researchers have the ethical responsibility and obligation to obtain gatekeeper consent, as they live with the daily consequences of the effects of research on participants. I curated a consent letter that was specifically for my gatekeeper to outline my identity, research aims and questions, as well as the type of research I would obtain, such as interviews and observations. My gatekeeper and I had regular meetings to observe my proper ethical and respectful practice towards the research carried out within the setting.

Ethical principles benefit research as they help to combat risks that may impact the validity of my research, such as children facing pressure to perform during observed times. I followed my ethical duty by completing the necessary steps to reduce the intrusion into my participants' educational journey, by observing them within their natural environments and organised lessons (Bertram et al, 2024). I worked to deconstruct any power dynamics by gaining assent of the children, after obtaining legal consent from their parents and caregivers to avoid compromising my ethical behaviour and maintain transparency with the children who participated (Bertram et al, 2024).

To protect the validity and reliability of my research, I protected the integrity of the community by practicing reflective writing throughout the process of data collection. This benefited my research by identifying any personal bias or statements that would lead me to generalise when analysing my data (Olmas-Vega et al, 2022). To conclude this chapter, I used an array of ethical principles to consider my practice to be respectful, ethical, and trustworthy, which always ensured the safety of my participants.

Findings and Discussions

This chapter aims to analyse and discuss the key findings from my data collection methods. To make sense of my data, I adopted a thematic approach towards the examination of my acquired information. In terms of my own data, I paired relevant information with appropriate resources from my literature review to make sense of how it agreed or disagreed with my research questions and aims. This approach enabled me to use thematic coding to formulate my own interpretivist opinions and views within the realm of qualitative research. I have used my research questions as subheadings to sort and group my collected data into three main themes.

How much agency do children have over their own educational outcomes?

Key findings from the collected data have explored my first research question of how children have displayed individual acts of agency during their daily educational routines. Clear analysis of data has revealed the practical application of theoretical frameworks, such as Albert Bandura's Social Learning Theory. This has enabled children to express acts of agency as they model teaching staff's behaviours during daily educational activities, such as 'Talking Time'. Observed practice in Observation 1 details staff modelling the use of equipment to encourage social behaviours such as turn-taking, waiting and listening to others. Nassar et al (2020) noted how contributions towards children's agency are supported during these activities, for instance, enabling social justice opportunities for children within educational settings. Nassar et al (2020) highlight the promotion of social justice functions as a breakdown of classroom power dynamics between students and educators, paving the way for systems of equity and inclusion.

Contrary to Nassar et al, Rantala (2020) demonstrates the notion that the use of such theoretical frameworks may undermine the opportunity for children's agency, as social learning enforces children to enact social behaviours that promote teaching staff's unconscious biases, such as gender homogenisation. Rantala (2020) highlights how gender stereotyping in educational settings reinforces gender norms, and the use of social modelling may lead to gender stereotyping. Upon further analysis of observation 1, male children were interested in superhero activities in outdoor environments, while female students had more interest in indoor literacy environments, as well as art and crafting learning resources. Rantala (2020) articulates that social interactions modify children's scope of action as they consume the behavioural expectations of their learning environments and, as a result, fortify the perception of how they must act due to their gender normative behaviours.

While gender intersectionality barriers persist in educational settings, key findings from the collected data have noted how proactive educating staff implement measures to mitigate personal factors that prevent children from becoming autonomous and using their agency in learning communities. For instance, teaching staff from the interview in two states

'I personally employ and use a Critical Lens Approach to ensure my practice is inclusive, rights-based, and encourages children to be active participants in my learning settings; however, I do this off my own personal back, but I believe that in my teaching experience, reflective practice is not really pushed enough into educational settings in reality'

Key insights from this interview showcase how teaching strategies impact the range of agency that children have in their educational outcomes. According to Bernard (2024), teaching staff exploring implications towards integrating children into their social environments and considering cultural contexts with the use of theoretical approaches such as a critical lens, tend to pave the way for culturally responsive teaching. Proactive teaching staff embodying this teaching tactic create ample opportunities for children to express agency in their learning outcomes. Bernard (2024) claims children's agency opportunities within culturally responsive teaching settings recognise cognitive, socioemotive, and physical needs, which allows for academic success.

Oposing this viewpoint, teaching staff become overwhelmed with the governing bodies imposing additional mental stress to push children to achieve academically, as it impacts many external factors for schools to maintain a positive reputation. Day (2019) makes a claim towards the notion that pressure to obtain academic success can outweigh agency opportunities for children, as academic achievement is prioritised before student voice and autonomy. Although key analysis from the collected data suggests teaching staff may adopt reflective practice to ensure both academic success and prioritise a rights-based pedagogy. Day (2019) argues that individual professional autonomy, regarding reflective approaches towards teaching strategies without proper management from higher governing bodies in schools, is below the necessary threshold to adequately coordinate a balance between pressures teaching staff face and enforcing children's agency over their own educational outcomes.

To summarise, key findings from this data analysis highlight the level of agency opportunities children possess over their own educational outcomes, which directly coincide with theoretical frameworks such as Albert Bandura's Social Learning theories, and the reflective practice approaches that educating staff take to combat unconscious biases that impact the social interactions within the learning community. Adopting culturally responsive teaching and ensuring a balance between the pressure to obtain academic success and promoting a rights-based teaching pedagogy promotes the level of agency opportunities for children to exercise their own rights in their own educational environment.

How do you include and support children's decision-making in their own learning?

Key findings derived from my collected data respond to my second research question of how teaching staff support and include children's decision-making into their daily learning processes. Comprehensive analysis from both interviews and observational data emphasizes a balance of traditional teaching methods, such as Goal Structured Teaching (Gertsakis, 2020), and learning strategies that provide opportunities for children to freely express and become their own 'self-expert' (Cedar, 2022), allowing them to thrive within their learning community. However, key thematic analysis investigates the nature of decision-making processes as a 'two-way process' between parents and practitioners (Scwartz, 2023), this may align with theories that child agency and a lack of decision-making opportunities contribute towards the ideology that agency is a social construct and not treated as a right of the child (Knoll et al, 2022).

Interpreting data from observation 9, such as the use of 'free-play sessions', children having the option of participation in the maths activity, and children's free choice of shop type and type of shape, make evidently clear use of Goal Structured Teaching. Research from Gertsakis et al (2020) indicates that the use of this teaching approach secures the promotion of decision-making opportunities for children within the learning environment. Gertsakis et al (2020) lean on theoretical framework such as Self-Determination Theory (Deci & Ryans, 1975) to examine how teachers create 'coherent collaborations' with students by offering voice and choice learning opportunities during teaching contexts, as well as recognising children's interests and using minimal demanding and controlling teaching methods during educational content, supports the creation of autonomy within a supportive class. Thematic analysis from observa-

tional data such as this, highlight how staff have used teaching approaches to establish children to make decisions within their settings.

Contrasting interpretations of collected data draw attention towards limitations that restrict children's decision-making processes within their learning setting. Data from Observation Form 9 supports research claims by Knoll and Becker (2022) that children's agency has undergone a modern reconceptualization that updates understandings that it is a social characteristic that has become embedded in processes of social interaction, and engagement that either is impeded upon or enabled through agentic behaviours (Knoll & Becker, 2022). My own research concurs these ideologies as even though children were provided with decision-making opportunities as per the sandwich station and had their own timescales to meet the aim of the activity. Interpreting this data through the eyes of Knoll and Becker highlights the notion that children may have been presented with artificial decision-making opportunities. This credits the ideology that children are social actors who contribute towards the construction of the educational culture that limits children's actual application towards a true agency, because it is socially viewed as a construct and not a right.

Differing interpretations offer an opposing view, Cedar (2022) conceptualises agency as a paradigm of childhood that enables children's rights to education, and it must become promoted via teaching staff offering decision-making opportunities within day-to-day contexts. Key findings from my own research from interview two quote

'I provide my students with lots controlled choices of where learning happens and multiple type of resources to use within free-flow activity sessions because they enjoy it'

Concedes with Cedar's (2022) idea that active listening and offering decision making opportunities pave the way for the creation of agency as children become their own expert and gain knowledge at their own capacity to acquire it.

Upon further critical analysis of my own data, I indicate additional limitations towards the implementation of children's own decision-making process during to their learning. Swartz (2023) notes ecological factors that relate towards children's agency as considerations towards the effectiveness of the parent partnerships with teaching staff must be made. Evidence from interview number one quote

'To learn about children's interests outside of school, we send home information forms to parents and carers, we ask the children too, but we always send home the forms for parents to fill out.'

This leans towards Schwartz's theoretical ideology of children's agency, opportunities to express their own voice and decision-making prevail on the coherent collaboration between parents, carers and teachers, compared to the teacher and child. This shows a limitation towards children within their learning setting, as agentic behaviour is based on the positive or negative experiences their parent has with their teaching staff.

To conclude, educators support and include children's decision-making processes within their learning environment in a range of ways such as multiple resources, choice of learning content within reason and with free-flowing settings. This supports their agency as it enables them to become 'active agents' that gather knowledge at their own capacity and rationale. Consequently, this can also impede on agentic structures within the learning environment as agency is debated as a socially constructed paradigm that is ecologically restricted based on disconnected parent-teacher relationships, and the notion that children are 'social actors' that contribute towards the construction of the educational culture of today.

How does the inclusion of each child's interests and likes impact their educational development?

Critical results from my observational and interviewing data have provided an answer for my third research question as to whether the inclusion of each child's interests and likes made a significant impact on their educational success. Embedding personal interests of the child and allowing choiceful opportunities within the learning environment enabled holistic development, as it promotes participation and engagement. However, many factors impact the inclusion of child interest, such as teaching staff experience, allowing the confidence to stray from offering more controlled resource choices within the learning community.

Liu (2020) offers an insight towards the inclusion of personal interest and choice as a foundation towards improving educational outcomes for all children, regardless of their cognitive capacity development or additional need status. Liu (2020) encourages teaching staff who motivate the agentic behaviours of children within their learning setting, with the inclusion of personal interest, foster holistic development due to increased levels of motivation. This teaching practice emerges from historically influential theoretical frameworks, such as Lev Vygotsky's Sociocultural Theory that offers an understanding of how individuals are responsible for building children's experiences through learning. Evidence from interview one quotes

'Including interests helps children stay focused for longer and entices them to come over and investigate, if they like paint and they see it, they are halfway there'

Manyukhina (2023) builds upon Liu's research by iterating the view that children are the experiencers of the learning. The need and capacity to convey choice, expression and engage facilitates an ownership of their own experience to be shaped by them, which improves the quality of their education as seen by the data collection throughout my research.

Contradictory to this viewpoint, Ketonan (2022) employs the notion that teaching experience limits the level of agency and prospect of autonomous learning in the form of personal interest within the learning environment, as new teachers may adopt rigidly planned lessons with specific resources and goals that remove the window for children to include their own body of interest towards an activity. Evident from interview number two as,

'I used to offer my pupils controlled choices only during the beginning, like one or two things only during art for example, for fear of what would happen and the mess. Now I just let them pick whatever they want and feel they need, especially during free-play and art'

Research from Archambault et al (2020) intertwines with ideologies from Ketonan (2020) by highlighting that quality teaching methods and pedagogy shape the confidence of the individual who delivers the educational content for the children within their scope. These characteristics take time to form, which impact the level of agency children are allowed within the setting, which includes the level of choice they have on their own academic outcomes.

To investigate this research question from another standpoint, Murray (2022) articulates young children offer powerful leverage for the acquisition of knowledge and critical thinking at a deeper level, and this can be impacted by teaching staff utilizing skills such as active listening and acting upon feedback offered from children. Murray (2022) argues that educational content can be shaped by the curiosity and interest levels of children, as gaining their feedback creates activity and lesson plans that satisfy children's curiosity. This allows for improved academic attainment and classroom participation levels. This is evident from observation number 7

Children were able to pick where they would go, what they would like to use, they had access to many different resources and had the chance to go either indoors or outdoors. Some children investigated many areas, while others engaged with one activity throughout the free flow play session, compared to more traditional classroom lessons.

Dettweiler et al (2022) build upon research claims by Murray and my own research by noting that the level of choicefulness children have in their own educational activities benefits their academic attainment. Dettweiler et al (2022) state this form of agency has particularly beneficial attributes towards children's cognitive development and the actual physical development of their cerebral frontal lobe, as it strengthens the ability to make decisions and logical thinking methods. Holla et al (2021) and Mundy (2024) elaborate on this notion by offering the idea that limiting free play restricts the holistic development and well-being of children, given that it limits the only opportunity for true free expression and personal interest-based learning in the setting. To achieve a true rights-based teaching pedagogy, children must be offered the chance to make purposeful choices and carry out interest-based learning activities rather than artificial decision-making processes, as this holds a true beneficial impact on their learning outcomes.

To conclude, teaching staff who provide children with a more directorial role within their educational content and embed the feedback provided by children, conduct interest-based learning methods within the learning environment. This is necessary to individuals who wish to embody a rights-based teaching strategy, that improves the agency opportunities for children within their learning community, by embedding children's personal interests into their educational delivery systems to improve outcomes for all children.

To conclude this chapter, I note a change within my positionality compared to the beginning of my research. To ensure that my own research is valid and reliable, I used a method of reflexivity to avoid contaminating my research with my own personal baggage and bias, to ensure the trustworthiness of my own data interpretations (Mukherji & Albon, 2018). Reflective accounts facilitated me to practice self-management as I was able to ensure I was focused on being subjective and avoiding issues that would harm my research, such as making generalisations and being stereotypical while making interpretations (Cottrel, 2023). Within this process I noticed that I was beginning to let my personal experiences with parents and caregivers from my own past students, immerse themselves into the opinions and views I was creating from my acquired data. The use of reflective accounts permitted me to identify and rectify this issue and note a change within my positionality and ensured the trustworthiness and validity of my research.

Conclusions

This chapter aims to bring this research project to a close. Key findings of this research project proclaim that literature within the realm of agency in early childhood immerses itself within the belief that the educational context that intertwines a pedagogic voice and stance leans towards a rights-based teaching strategy that creates a learning atmosphere that is truly beneficial towards the learning outcomes of a child.

Contrary to implementing factors, such as the teaching pressures that educational staff are faced with to obtain a high academic success rate, and that distributed leadership styles may propel power dynamics within the classroom (Humphrey, 2020). Literature from Kamiri (2024), Forg and Samuelson (2022), and De Sousa (2019) rebut the idea by articulating the sustainability that a rights-based teaching method has in the deconstruction of classroom behavioural issues, as children become active agents and participate in the decision-making processes of their educational content, improving engagement levels.

Key findings from my research analysis explore that the relationship between the parent/caregiver and teaching staff has a direct impact on the level of agency opportunities that educating staff can provide for children within the setting. Coherent collaborations between teaching staff and parental figures pave the way forward towards the agency outcomes, as positive or negative relationships constructed between each party augment the trust between them, as well as the ability to share relevant information and create a working relationship to benefit the child (Swartz, 2023).

I believe this research has contributed towards the debate between child-centred and adult-led discussion, as the thematic analysis and wide range of literature have provided a clear and balanced argument towards the proposed research questions, fulfilling the aim of the research. This research project has extended current knowledge towards historical theoretical frameworks, such as Lev Vygotsky's Sociocultural Theory, by offering an understanding that the need to convey choice and interest within the classroom facilitates the engagement of children, and shows educators that children have an ownership of their academic attainment and outcomes (Liu, 2020; Manyukhina, 2023).

The practical application of my research data collection methods brought limitations to the research project that I had not anticipated during the planning portion of my research process. The ability to find willing participants to conduct my semi-structured interview as staff within the nursery felt a sense of judgment on their practice. The emotional challenge of trying to create an emotional bond between participant and researcher within a short timeframe made participants feel less confident to provide the time to carry out an interview with me (Goyes, 2024). However, I was able to combat this with the use of an information letter that outlined the intent of my research, and the use of self-reflection to correct any behaviour that made participants feel assessed and kept my demeanour more neutral.

The repetition of this research project would enable me to behave differently during the second process. I would conduct multiple interviews with the same willing participants over a longer period. I believe this would improve the relationship between the participants that I had. Goyes et al (2024) articulate that secondary interviews with the same participants facilitate the accumulation of more in-depth data, as participants feel more comfortable sharing their perspectives as they feel more secure within the researcher's presence. If I were to repeat this project, I would include this within my methodology to combat the issues I had faced when conducting the data collection of this research project.

I believe this process has changed my positionality as the role of self-reflection allowed me to truly examine my own personal views and the intersectionality that impacts my experience within education as a young white woman. This experience has allowed me to apply a critical lens towards the political and social debates that surround women within education. Gender and race intersectionality prevail in the educational succession of marginalised individuals in higher educational spaces, and this process has highlighted the identification of a lack of African women's voice within this higher academic literature within the field of academia (White, 2011; Unterhalter, 2022). Facilitating the realisation of the privilege I have when contributing towards this field, as well as the precautions I must take to empower my fellow female colleagues within this field.

To conclude, this research project has highlighted recommendations that can provide educational staff to ensure that they are enabling children to utilize their voice within the classroom to their full capacity. The implementation of more free-play time both inside and outside within childhood settings would facilitate the higher use of child choice within the allocated time children are present in schools (Lee Bar, 2024). This would facilitate agency opportunities and permit the deconstruction of marginalisation in settings, as the scholarship between an educator's understanding of pedagogic voice and a rights-based teaching strategy is imperative towards constructing the ultimate learning environment for children during their learning journey (Jerome, 2022; Rantala, 2022; Bernard, 2024). This is the perspective I wish to take from this research experience and adopt it into my own teaching styles when the time comes to take the step from learner to educator.

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