



This is an Accepted Manuscript version of the article published originally by Taylor & Francis accepted for publication in the journal:

Teachers and Teaching

This version may differ from the original in pagination and typographic details. When using, please cite the original.

AUTHOR(S)

Anton, A. C., & Aerila, J.-A.

TITLE

'We Have a Great Deal of Influence': Finnish Early Childhood In-Service Teachers' Agency for Culturally Sustaining Pedagogy

YEAR

2024

DOI

10.1080/13540602.2024.2422860

CITATION

Anton, A. C., & Aerila, J.-A. (2024). *'We Have a Great Deal of Influence': Finnish Early Childhood In-Service Teachers' Agency for Culturally Sustaining Pedagogy*. *Teachers and Teaching*, 1–19.

<https://doi.org/10.1080/13540602.2024.2422860>

VERSION

Accepted Manuscript

LICENSE

In Copyright © 2024 Taylor & Francis

‘We have a great deal of influence’: Finnish early childhood in-service teachers’ agency for culturally sustaining pedagogy

Alexandra C. Anton^{a*} and Juli-Anna Aerila^b

^aDepartment of Teacher Education, Åbo Akademi University, Vaasa, Finland; ^bDepartment of Teacher Education, University of Turku, Rauma, Finland

* Corresponding author: Alexandra Anton – alexandra.anton@abo.fi. Faculty of Education and Welfare Studies, Academill, Rantakatu 2, 65100 Vaasa, Finland.

Abstract

This qualitative study focused on the role of teacher agency and critical reflection in the context of an in-service training program for early childhood education and care (ECEC) teachers in Finland. The program emphasized culturally sustainable pedagogy and aimed to support teachers in an increasingly multilingual society. This study aimed to investigate how teachers displayed agency as they tried to promote culturally sustaining pedagogy, and how critical reflection interacted with teachers’ professional agency. The data of the study were versatile, as they consisted of influential texts implemented via the creative writing process, two questionnaires, and interviews with the participants. The data were analysed theoretically and empirically through inductive-deductive reasoning. The investigation revealed four levels at which in-service teachers manifest agency in culturally sustaining pedagogy: individual, child-oriented, institutional, and societal. The results revealed that by writing influential texts, ECEC practitioners significantly challenged their assumptions about their agentic capacity and inspired them to reflect on their practices critically. The findings also revealed that in terms of the targeted audience, participants were not confident in their agentic role in influencing systemic change. These findings highlight

the importance of discussing multiple aspects of agency in teacher education by using guided critical reflection.

Keywords: teachers' agency, early childhood, critical reflection, in-service teachers, culturally sustaining pedagogy

1. Introduction

As societies worldwide become increasingly multicultural, the demographics of early childhood classrooms undergo significant transformations. Over time, as these students progress through the education system, noticeable differences have been documented in the academic performance of immigrant and non-immigrant students (Program for International Student Assessment [PISA] administered by the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development [OECD], 2023). Policy interventions are crucial (OECD, 2023), in particular in teacher education. Appropriate preparation can support teachers to recognize and challenge inequities in their daily teaching practices (Repo et al., 2024), strengthen their agency (Jones & Charteris, 2017), and address 'asymmetrical relationships' between minority children and society at large (Ladson Billings, 2011, p. 34). Among recommendations for transforming the educational system is emphasizing teachers' agency in spurring change. Although this topic is discussed across the literature (Pantić & Florian, 2015) and policy documents, it remains short of support for true development (Zeichner, 2017). There are only limited studies documenting how teacher agency can impact educational practices and policies (Zeichner, 2019). Teachers' professional agency has often been associated with teachers' opposition to the external socio-political system in response to problematic situations (Biesta et al., 2015; Robinson, 2012). Ladson-Billings (2009) described teachers with culturally relevant practices to 'work in opposition to the system that employs them. [...] However,

they cannot let their critique reside solely in their words. They must turn it into action by challenging the system' (p. 140). This intrinsically connects teachers' agency to culturally sustaining pedagogy, which focuses not only on the process of deconstructing coloniality but also on constructing alternatives (Alim et al., 2020). To define the professional agency of contemporary teachers in this study, we recognize the prevailing 'traditional' discourse in Finland, in which teachers uphold the status quo (Matikainen et al., 2018), and the more 'transformative' discourse in which teachers bear an ethical responsibility for the society and their students to challenge and transform harmful power dynamics and longstanding traditions (Freire, 2017; Mezirow, 1997).

Culturally sustaining pedagogy is necessary for educational environments where ideologies, policies, and practices, need to be critically reflected on, divested from, and other typologies of relations, identities, and experiences need to be invested in (Alim et al., 2020). By advocating for culturally and linguistically diverse students, teachers can affect their academic performance (Yu, 2022) and contribute to improved interpersonal and structural opportunities (Gray et al., 2018). By eliminating structural barriers that devalue minoritized populations, teachers can create a supportive environment that fosters a sense of belonging among all children (Arvola, 2020). According to the literature, when designing professional development courses to equip and empower various generations of teachers to advocate for educational equity, teacher educators should foster learning that seeks to meet the emotional, social, and academic needs of culturally and linguistically diverse children (Samuels, 2018). Preparing and encouraging ECEC teachers to become culturally sustaining pedagogues requires learning opportunities and circumstances in which deficit beliefs are challenged, especially when teachers associate their own identities, norms, or funds of knowledge as having more power or worth (Alim et al., 2020). The article explores teacher agency in the context of culturally sustained pedagogy through data collected from Finnish

ECEC teachers who participated in an in-service training program. As part of the course, the teachers produced influential texts that emphasized aspects related to policies and practices that could benefit from a more culturally sustaining approach for more equitable educational practices. In the subsequent sections, we explore the theoretical concepts that guided our research, followed by an overview of our methodology, results, and contributions. We conclude with a discussion of the significance and implications of this study, as well as suggest ways to further develop this area of study.

2. Teacher agency for culturally sustaining pedagogical practices

The empirical work presented in this article relates to the elements that affect teachers' agency: personal capacity (skills and knowledge – described here as tacit knowledge), beliefs (professional and personal), and values (Priestley et al., 2015). We were initially guided by the operating facets of teacher agency identified from practicing teachers (Molla and Nolan, 2020). They were named as inquisitive agency ('actively seek learning opportunities'), deliberative agency ('think effortfully about their beliefs and practices'); recognitive agency ('demand to be valued and respected for their professional work'), responsive agency ('are committed to addressing educational disadvantages'), and moral agency ('act ethically and make morally justifiable decisions'). Consequently, our aim was to investigate how Finnish ECEC professionals transform tacit knowledge which Schön (1995) describes as 'knowing-in-action' into 'explicit' agency during a professional development course, while engaging in writing influential texts and guided critical reflection, as well whether other (if any) facets of agency might result from the data-driven analysis. We describe 'explicit agency' as communicable, transmittable, self-persuasive, and influential in persuading others to challenge their beliefs and to act differently.

In recent years, there has been growing theoretical discussion and empirical investigation of teachers' professional agency and their actual practice (Kauppinen et al. 2020; Molla and Nolan, 2020; Priestley et al., 2016; Varpanen et al., 2022). Agency is not a fixed quality or disposition that people have (Schwartz & Okita, 2009), but something that people do (Greeno, 2006) and achieve (Biesta & Tedder, 2006); it is the temporal, social, and material contexts that can enable and constrain action (Priestley et al., 2015). According to the ecological approach to teacher agency, in-service teachers accumulate 'unique professional expertise and experience of the everyday realities of education' (p.5), which helps them assess the involvement of each stakeholder, by utilizing 'their professional voice and their professional judgment' (Priestley et al., 2015).

Teachers' actions are shaped by both their tacit and explicit knowledge. Tacit knowledge is often acquired from personal experience, and some of its key characteristics are that it is personal, experiential, and context-specific. Nonaka and Takeuchi (1995) used a knowledge spiral model to represent the dynamics between tacit and explicit knowledge. In their view, through socialization and externalization at the group level, tacit knowledge becomes explicit and conceptualized using metaphors and analogies, as well as theories and concepts. Group members' explicit knowledge and personal insights are combined and exchanged, then assimilated and internalized at an individual level, being transformed into tacit knowledge from where the knowledge spiral starts again.

The interconnectedness between critical reflection and teacher agency is essential for transformational professional learning (Jones & Charteris, 2017). Previously described as having both an inward and outward focus (Dewey, 1933; Mezirow, 1997; Liu, 2015), critical reflection refers to the 'process of constantly analyzing, questioning and critiquing established assumptions of oneself, schools, and the society about teaching and learning, and the social and political

implications of schooling' (Liu, 2015, p. 144). Through carefully guided critical reflection, teachers can access perspectives that, characterized by inclusivity, self-awareness, and the integration of practical experience (Mezirow, 1997), guide their future practices and praxis as agentic action.

3. Research context

This research was conducted in Finland, where as is happening around the world, demographics have undergone significant changes. Preliminary data show that Finland has registered a record number of migrants, with 71,918 individuals moving to Finland in 2023 (Statistics Finland, 2024). In 2022, the group of 0–4-year-olds speaking a language that was not Finnish, or Swedish at home was the most numerous of all daycare and school-aged children (Official Statistics of Finland, 2023). As it is mentioned in policy documents, to incorporate more multicultural content, educational institutions must acquire a different kind of knowledge: 2017 documents from the Ministry of Education (Karila et al., 2017) point out the importance of the awareness of different values and educational goals is important in a multicultural world. This in turn require relational agency and expertise on the part of all professionals from different educational backgrounds. This is recognized as part of the main aims of Finnish early childhood and care (Act on Early Childhood and Care, 2018) to create prerequisites for well-being and democracy, promote social justice, and prevent children's social exclusion.

The professionalization of the Finnish ECEC workforce is in line with the European agenda of developed economies (OECD, 2012). Compared to other more centralized education systems built on standards-based policies, Finnish education is internationally renowned for being shaped by the delegation of decision-making authority and accountability to the local level, teacher autonomy,

and trust-based professionalism (Lavonen, 2018). The professionalism of teachers in Finland is typically attributed to the collective traits acquired during the training and preparation of educators, and to the continuous school site support rather than to individual characteristics (Lavonen et al., 2015). Cultural and educational policy factors at the national, local, and school levels significantly shape their professionalism (Lavonen, 2018). Active agency is expected from Finnish teachers in their professional development and learning, although a recent analysis of policy documents shows that these requirements lack a focal point and explicit implications for teacher education and in-service training (Kangas & Harju-Luukkainen, 2021).

Teacher educators play a central role in designing courses that create social spaces for interaction and opportunities to practice active participation and critical reflection, and empower teachers' agency (Butera et al., 2021; Lipponen & Kumpulainen, 2011; Varpanen et al., 2022). In the 2010s, interest in Finnish teachers' agency started increasing nationally (Kauppinen et al., 2020; Lipponen & Kumpulainen, 2011; Varpanen et al., 2022). While these studies inform the positioning of agency for teachers within the Finnish educational system, none of them provides empirical evidence about ECEC teachers themselves. Development of in-service teacher education in Finland, including Finnish policymakers clarifying the meaning and transferability of ECEC teachers' agency in real classroom practice, is much needed (Kangas & Harju-Luukkainen, 2021).

This study was conducted as part of a project funded by the Finnish National Agency for Education (FNAE) between 2021-2023, organized by a university in West Southern Finland and designed for in-service teachers to respond to increasing linguistic and cultural diversity. The aim was to develop and support research-based pedagogical practices, innovative practices in ECEC and promote the social significance of early childhood education through personnel activities. During

the final course, the teachers participated in a creative writing workshop and produced influential texts that could be used to persuade others to consider adopting culturally sustaining practices. The course consisted of presentations by guest speakers, such as researchers, activists, experts, editors, ministerial advisors, representatives of migration institutes, and children's affairs. These, in turn, informed the writing of their influential texts. The presentations provided teachers with holistic perspectives on the topics and helped them identify and explore their role as active agents within the early childhood structure.

The study sought to answer the following research questions:

- How do in-service ECEC teachers display agency as they try to promote culturally sustaining pedagogy?
- How does critical reflection interact with teachers' professional agency?

4. Methodology

4.1 Participants and data collection

The data for this study were collected between the fall of 2022 and the summer of 2023, and it consisted of answers to two questionnaires (one at the beginning and one at the end of the course), the draft and the final versions of the participants' influential texts, the visual support used for in-class presentations of each final text, and an interview at the end of the course. The study participants included 11 female in-service teachers enrolled in a course organized by a university in West Southern Finland (Table 1). Initially, all 26 in-service teachers with ECEC backgrounds taking part in the course were asked to participate in the study. Of these, five were interested and available, and six agreed to contribute their final texts and visual presentations, which they knew

were going to be made public. The study complied with the Finnish Advisory Board on Research Integrity (TENK in Finnish) guidelines, and online informed consent was obtained from the teachers. Participation in the study was voluntary, teachers' anonymity was protected, and instructions were provided on how to interrupt the study. The quotations were anonymized, so that no individual identification was possible.

The influential texts were the main course assignments. During all the stages of the writing process, guided critical reflections were infused and documented in the two questionnaires and interviews. The influential text assignment followed the guidelines of a process writing method (Linna, 2000), which followed several stages: brainstorming and ideation, collecting materials and sketching, narrowing down the topic and point of view, choosing the genre, finalizing the text, and publishing it. In this study, teachers could freely choose their topic and audience in alignment with the aims of the course, their personal interests and work contexts. They could write individually, in pairs, or in groups while being encouraged to work collaboratively as well as schedule personalized writing assistance from the second author of this article.

The open-ended questionnaire items were designed by the two authors based on the theoretical framework of culturally sustaining pedagogy (Alim et al., 2020) and its intrinsic connection to teachers' professional agency (see the Theory section of this article) to examine teachers' stances in relation to different aspects of agency regarding the cultural and linguistic diversity present in their classrooms. The two critical reflection questionnaires were translated into Finnish by the second author and the coordinator of the course and integrated into the course design. The questionnaires and interviews were designed to identify the most common beliefs, tacit knowledge, and practices that teachers could explore during the writing process of their influential texts

(Hernandez et al., 2017). They were available for use by all teachers during the development phase of their influential texts and for the final evaluation of their writing process and final reflection, irrespective of their choice to participate in the study. Critical reflection was emphasized to help teachers understand at a deeper level why the issue is significant or relevant to themselves and other stakeholders whom they chose to represent by writing the text and how writing the text furthered their thinking about the subject matter.

One week after the last class session, three semi-structured online interviews were conducted with the authors of three influential texts, individually if there was only one author per text or in pairs when there were two authors per text (Table 1), focusing on individual teachers' experiences of sharing their texts with their colleagues, their perceptions of how the creation of the texts affected themselves and others, and how they saw their texts benefit children from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds and their teachers. The interviews were conducted in Finnish and English and included both authors to reduce linguistic barriers. All the interviews were video-recorded and transcribed, and the responses in Finnish were first translated into English using the online program DeepL and then double-checked by the second author, who is a native Finnish speaker. The participants were coded by numbering and these codes were included in the direct quotes used in the reporting of the data, edited for comprehensibility when needed.

4.2 Data analysis

For this study, we applied a qualitative inductive-deductive analysis (Miles et al., 2019): deductive when theory-driven, and inductive when data-driven. This allowed us to explore the multifaceted realities reported by Finnish ECEC teachers during the writing process of their influential texts.

The analysis was conducted in stages. We applied open and inductive coding (Miles et al., 2019) to the questionnaire answers and verbatim transcripts of the interviews, which we analyzed thematically. The initial data analysis consisted of reading and re-reading the answers to the two questionnaires, the draft and final product of the six influential texts, and the interview transcripts to identify common themes across all participants in the study. This resulted in the creation of a hierarchy of the facets of agency. The second step, constant comparative analysis, included connecting the research literature and theories of teacher agency (Priestley et al., 2015) with the data sources (Glaser & Strauss, 2017). The two authors performed the analysis independently and then discussed it together to determine differences in the interpretations of the text extracts, which could correspond to more than one key theme. Consideration was given to any overlaps and / or divergences between the extracts and the rest of the text produced by the same participant to reach an agreement.

Further analysis was carried out by the first author, beginning with color-coding keywords and phrases that referred to similar targets of agency (the individual teacher, group of children, other teachers, and society). These four targets suggested a possible lens to better understand agency, which was regularly discussed during the research process. The results were then compared with the findings of previous studies (Kauppinen et al., 2020; Molla and Nolan, 2020). Our findings complement the five facets of teachers' professional agency (inquisitive, deliberative, recognitive, responsive, and moral) developed by Molla and Nolan (2020). Common themes were identified across all teachers participating in the study, which were then grouped into clusters and organized hierarchically, by the socially constructed experiences involved.

5. Findings

ECEC teacher's agency that promotes culturally sustaining pedagogy

To illustrate how in-service ECEC teachers displayed agency as they tried to promote culturally sustaining pedagogies and strategies, statements teachers made regarding their power over educational and social justice for culturally and linguistically diverse children attending ECEC in Finland were identified and analyzed.

As reflected in the six influential texts, our findings indicated that these Finnish ECEC teachers engaged in various levels of agency: personal, interpersonal, and societal. The multiple levels of teachers' professional agency align with Eteläpelto et al.'s (2013) subject-centered socio-cultural approach, which promotes the acknowledgment of the socio-cultural constraints in which agency is realized, accessible resources in participants' work contexts, and their current work-related identity. The multi-level model for understanding the manifestation of teacher agency aligns with prior descriptions of teacher agency and is illustrated by the empirical findings of the current study. Data analysis led to the development of a four-level model of teacher agency: *Individual*, *Child-oriented*, *Institutional*, and *Societal*. Each level is briefly described in Figure 1, and a selection of representative direct quotes from the participants is presented below.

Individual level of agency

The *Individual* level of teacher agency illustrates that educators assume the role of primary agents in eliciting profound individual transformation when they actively participate in emotional and cognitive processes to enhance their own identity (*self-exploratory*), pursue learning prospects (*inquisitive*), examine their beliefs and practices (*deliberative*), and make morally sound judgments (*moral*).

Self-exploratory descriptors refer to teachers' engagement in emotional and cognitive processes to define and refine their identities. Teacher 9's answer, for example, suggests that she acknowledged the profound personal struggles she experienced at a socio-emotional level and that the writing process helped her refine her identity as a teacher and change agent:

T 9: The writing process was a kind of positive psychology exercise and a kind of work guidance for me. When I was able to unpack the work issues that were bothering me and try to come up with positive solutions, my own anxiety dissipated.

The *inquisitive* descriptor refers to teachers' interest in seeking new learning opportunities. As it was originally designed by Molla and Nolan (2020) to reflect the newly and professionally isolated teachers' attractiveness to professional growth, we found it relevant also for more experienced T3 in Finland to continue learning from the latest research and deepening her knowledge.

T3: The process nature of writing helped me to take my own ideas forward and made me check the inaccuracies of my arguments.

Deliberative, a term used by Molla and Nolan (2020), refers to teachers' ability to critically reflect on their pedagogical practices and theories behind them. The collaborative process is what T2 appreciates as having an impact on her self-confidence.

T2: I think that I'm more self-confident nowadays about talking about playing and the meaning of playing. So somehow, even if I've been working in this area for 30 years now, I think it's this process is about sharing things with other people and about the feedback, not about the knowledge.

The term *moral*, as described by Molla and Nolan (2020), refers to acting ethically and making morally justifiable decisions visible through three dimensions of professional integrity. Informed

by our collected data, we added to the meaning of ‘moral’ the inner responsibility teachers hold first to themselves. Driven by a moral call to action, T1 began to see more clearly the implications of reproducing social inequalities for educational justice (Butera et al., 2021) and her agentic role.

T1: The topic [racism] triggered a lot of my own internal reflection during the autumn as a human being and as a teacher, a reflection on my own whiteness, but also a reflection on my responsibility as a language and culture teacher to take the debate on the topic forward. Do I reinforce, maintain, or dismantle equality?

Child-oriented level of agency

The *Child-oriented* level of agency necessitates that educators acknowledge children's roles as contributors to a culturally sustaining and linguistically responsive environment. *Child-oriented* agentic teachers typically aim to foster self-development in children by facilitating experiences and actions that promote their agency (*bildung-builder*). This requires recognizing the power differentials between adults and children (*ethical*), as well as acknowledging the child's unique perspective on the world (*sensitive*).

The *Bildung-builder* descriptor refers to teachers' sense of agency in promoting children's self-development through their experiences, actions, and agency. In the Finnish context, *Bildung* symbolizes teachers' freedom to ensure that the curriculum goals for children's autonomy, such as self-determination and self-reflected personality, are reached (Schneider et al., 2012). Teachers' ability to create educational experiences that are culturally and linguistically significant for the children, and in accordance with their understanding of the world, as well as their readiness to observe and follow children's initiatives and perspectives, are essential to *Bildung-builder* agentic teachers. For example, T4 was concerned about the support children with a non-Finnish

background receive from teachers and how much linguistic diversity is part of the learning environment and everyday interaction.

T4: I was thinking about how the children's first languages are involved with playthings. Are adults using those languages or just Finnish? Do the languages show... can I see them in the space?

The *ethical* descriptor touches upon teachers referring to their own power of influence and choosing to refer to their moral responsibility toward representing children, especially when their Finnish linguistic abilities are not extensive.

T10&11: Children themselves do not have the opportunity to promote their own rights.

The *sensitive* facet of Child-oriented level agency concerns teachers promoting and honoring children's voices and lenses to the world. One of T5-8's comments suggests that ECEC personnel might overlook the reality that children with lower Finnish language skills might rely on interpreting the atmosphere in the group and grow up feeling that they do not belong there.

T5-8: Children read the mood and non-verbal communication. Those who do not yet speak Finnish or have little Finnish sense the atmosphere even more acutely.

Institutional level of agency

The *Institutional* level of agency describes the capacity of educators to intentionally contribute to the growth of their colleagues. Educators who are willing to engage in discussions about challenging subjects with their colleagues to foster team growth (*valiant*), share their personal reflections and resources (*collegial*), and seek empirical evidence to comprehend phenomena (*scientific*), can be considered agents of change at the *Institutional* level.

The *valiant* descriptor refers to the disposition of courage teachers display by being determined to approach difficult topics with their co-workers. This reflects the findings of Heikkilä et al. (2022) that co-workers play a distinct role in teachers' display and negotiation of agency that promotes culturally sustaining pedagogy.

T1 speaks about thought-provoking topics she initiated, whereas T5-8 explain how their group selected a less controversial topic and more facile to approach with their colleagues at work.

T1: I started to consciously draw the staff's attention on a deeper level to diversity, for example, racism. This autumn, I've also wanted to be in groups and in my own work community to stimulate the discussion more. What should everyone in the fields of education, teaching, social services, and health be concerned with? What does diversity mean to them, and whether their own activities are such that they dismantle or maintain certain stereotypes? How do we, in early childhood education, see the world?

T5-8: Attitude is an easier topic than anti-racism.

The *collegial* descriptor of the model refers to agentic teachers who promote team development and share personal insights and materials.

T3: I consider my position as a language and culture teacher as a key position of empowerment. The work is slow and sometimes it feels like nothing happens for a long time. However, change happens one person and one encounter at a time.

The *scientific* descriptor refers to agentic teachers seeking research-based elaboration in an attempt to influence their close community. T2 argued that she used national-level studies to consolidate her arguments and persuade the reader.

T2: *I think that ECEC staff do have opportunities to influence. However, this influence must be justified. Opinion pieces are perhaps more likely to provoke annoyance, pro-and-con arguments, and mudslinging. It would be important to get professional but interesting texts or quotes from a reliable source into the mainstream media.*

Societal level of agency

The Societal agency reflects teachers' capacity to have a genuine voice and grassroots-informed perspective in contributing to educational policies (Robinson, 2012). They possess a strong conviction that their opinions should carry weight in the decision-making process (*structural*). Such educators are prepared to demonstrate the significance of their work and the worth of their profession in ensuring the smooth functioning of society, despite the negative portrayal of teachers in the media (*recognitive*). Teachers who exercise agency at the Societal level are prepared to tackle the issue of unequal treatment in the provision of educational opportunities to children and initiate new topics of discussion within society (*responsive*).

The teachers in this study observed *structural* challenges or incongruences within the ecosystem design or with resource allocation. They stated that their agency was defined by their voices being heard by decision-makers.

T1: *I think it's our job to speak up and make our voices heard, even if sometimes it feels like no one is listening. I don't feel that no one listens to us, but this autumn, I have started to feel more strongly that the 'right' people (e.g., those in decision-making positions) don't listen to us.*

The *recognitive* facet of agency was shaped by Molla and Nolan (2020) to capture 'teachers being valued and respected for their professional work.' Half of the participants in the study talked about

the predominantly negative image of ECEC in the national public eye. This unfavorable public recognition triggered T2 to counteract it by providing solutions and contributing to a positive change. If prior understanding of the recognitive facet of agency refers mainly to recognition as the booster of agency, our data show that criticism can also recalibrate strategies to agentic work.

T2: *“Advertising” the lack of resources and incompetent educators is not the way I want to make a difference, but the other way around!*

The *responsive* facet of agency (Molla and Nolan, 2020) refers to teachers being ‘committed to addressing educational disadvantages’ by successfully meeting children's diverse needs and abilities. The Finnish National Core Curriculum (FNAE [Finnish National Agency for Education], 2019) gives ECEC personnel the responsibility of considering ‘cultural diversity as a resource’ (p.29) in their daily practice.

T10&11: *‘The [final] text is about the promotion of children's rights and the realization of equal opportunities in society.*

T2: *I hope that the [final] text will be thought-provoking and will concretize the importance of play also in terms of linguistic, cultural, and religious diversity.*

The interaction of critical reflection to teacher’s professional agency

Critical reflection requires openness and self-awareness (Nieto, 2006). In this study, all the ECEC practitioners reported ways in which writing their influential texts significantly challenged their assumptions about their agentic capacity and inspired them to make changes in their practice. In terms of levels of agency, it surfaced that even for the most experienced Finnish ECEC teachers, it was not common to be overly confident in their agentic role in influencing systemic change. An

understanding of their role as agents of change does not appear to have been emphasized sufficiently throughout their careers, which impacted the level of agency they consider when they aim for change.

Some of the participants associated their agentic role brought up by their text with an urgency to address the critical challenges that confront the society as demonstrated by T1 who abandoned her position of neutrality (Kelly & Brandes, 2001):

T1: Polarities are growing in our society at an alarming rate. It is easy to divide us and others all the time. It happens a lot in everyday life if you make a conscious effort to observe it. [...] How can we feel we belong to anything when we are constantly slipping further and further away from each other?

The final versions of the final six influential texts included aspects from multiple levels of agency illustrated above, but each targeted a specific audience, associated with a precise level of agency (Table 2). Analysis of the final texts revealed that the most prevalent aspects of influence were *Child-oriented* and *Institutional*, whereas the least observed were *Individual* and *Societal* levels of agency. With regard to the intended audience and the aim of inspiring and influencing them to adopt new perspectives and alter their practices, five of the six influential texts were connected to the *Institutional* level of agency. The authors shared their influential texts with their colleagues either during the monthly pedagogical gatherings arranged by the institution, or during the continuous on-site training sessions held throughout the academic year. One text, a lobbying effort towards candidates in the Finnish parliamentary election, was linked to the *Societal* level of agency.

Most of the participants indicated that the subject matter addressed in their influential texts was either insufficiently covered or entirely ignored in their workplaces, which led to flaws in

pedagogical practices. These in-service teachers justified their choices by referencing the training gaps or blind spots in teaching practices that they had personally witnessed, which served as motivation for selecting the topics and approach. Five of the texts were intended for other ECEC teachers – hence the *Institutional* level of agency, as the authored themselves were ECEC professionals. In contrast, the remaining text was designed for politicians and was written by ECEC coordinators, who, due to the nature of their roles, are closer to decision-makers in terms of hierarchy. They used the PISA scores to get the attention of their target audience (Finnish parliamentary election candidates) as international assessment results generally receive high levels of interest from politicians and policymakers. This influential text persuades the readers that young children attending Finnish daycare need to be provided the right to study Finnish intensively from an early age, with the support of specialized teachers in Finnish as a second language.

T10&11: How do you change the direction of the learning results [in PISA] from a falling cow's tail to a rising cairn terrier's tail? [...] Learning doesn't start until August of the first grade. A lot is done and happens in pre-primary education, but magic cannot be made - not even in two-year pre-primary education.

6. Discussion

As referred to in our introduction, Zeichner (2019) observes that there is little documentation of how teachers' agency impacts educational practices and policies, something that is borne out by our study:

‘The goal here is to support teacher agency and to benefit from teachers' expertise in ways that are connected to system goals to provide *everyone's children* with access to well-prepared

teachers and a high quality and enriching education that addresses academic, social-emotional, and civic aspects of learning and that reflects the multicultural and global realities that affect all nations' (p. 12).

Our findings contribute to the field in two ways. First, we reshaped and broadened the concept of agency into a hierarchical format. If the professional agency was previously conceptualized as a dynamic and ongoing process (Lipponen and Kumpulainen, 2011), highly contextualized, and multi-faceted (Molla and Nolan, 2020), our study shows that it is multi-leveled, and distributed in a socially constructed experience. This hierarchy emphasizes the importance of creating conditions for teachers to reflect critically, discover and express their voices at all levels of agency. The participants in this study were not beginners with their agentic journey, though the critically reflective nature of their course assignments contributed to refreshing their expertise by bringing their tacit knowledge to the surface and empowering them to understand their role as change agents in their teaching community and beyond it (Kopisto et al., 2015; Sherfinski et al., 2019). This study disclosed what is missed when experienced teachers are not encouraged to explore and utilize the power of their voices in all complexity, which is 'fundamentally connected with developing one's sense of agency' (Brookfield, 1995).

Second, this study reinforces the contribution of professional development in promoting critical reflection for culturally sustaining and linguistically responsive practices by transforming teachers' attitudes toward educational and social justice through explicit agency (Jones & Charteris, 2017; Kauppinen et al., 2020; Nolan & Guo, 2022). For that, it is teacher education's essential role to facilitate critical reflection and to head toward program-wide coherence in preparing teachers to teach and advocate for culturally and linguistically diverse young students. The approach in the project of using critical reflection to foster teachers' agency' and the

reflections presented in this article support the principles required for the development of their ‘sense of agency’ and ‘sense of their own collective power’ (Coffman, 2015, p. 323). The creative writing process was a critical aspect of the process as it required teachers to face a myriad of internal struggles that they did not have to face alone, but as part of a collective effort.

We advocate that the four-layered model (Figure 1) for understanding the manifestation of teacher agency, which emerged from the data analysis, be used in designing future interventions. Our findings align with prior research that led to the creation of a model of teacher agency for social justice (Pantić, 2015) that places engagement with reflexivity among its key characteristics. The four levels of the model are in accordance with prior studies (Atkin, 1994; Calvert, 2016; Eteläpelto et al., 2013; Priestley et al., 2015; Varpanen et al., 2022), whereas the descriptors were grounded in the research by Molla & Nolan (2020) and were extended by the data analysis for this study. Our participants chose the target audience for their influential texts predominantly from the *Institutional* level, which reinforces prior findings (Hinnant-Crawford, 2016) that show that it is still a matter of peculiarity for teachers to view themselves as influencing educational policy creation and implementation, an aspect that Finnish teachers were dissatisfied with.

Excerpts from teachers’ texts indicate that some of them may have achieved new levels of understanding of their agentic roles in issues connected to cultural and linguistic diversity, as well as racism and privilege. Although the influential texts were authored by a small number of Finnish early childhood teachers, the selected topics captured the most acute current vulnerabilities of ECEC nationally and or international reports (OECD, 2021). This strongly supports the importance of trusting teachers’ compass and contributing through critical reflection to reclaim their agency when depreciated or lost.

Although our primary objective was not to investigate our roles and practice as teacher educators, we inadvertently engaged in such an endeavor. This process led us to reflect on the project and consider making future improvements that would encourage in-service teachers to engage with educational and social justice discourse and explore their agentic roles above and beyond their current spectrum of dominance. Changes we propose include (1) integrating critical reflection with consistency throughout the project phases, not just in the final course; (2) explicitly discussing with future groups of in-service teachers the levels of agency developed in this study as part of sessions that aim to strengthen teachers' reflection and agency; and (3) involving teachers in the metacognitive process required to co-engage them so that they can monitor their own agentic and reflective journey (Fox et al., 2019).

While our four-level model captures the understanding and manifestation of teacher agency of a small sample of Finnish ECEC teachers only, we trust that this model can contribute to understanding and enhancing teachers' critical professional agency. For that, we need to uncover pre- and in-service teachers' areas of influence sooner rather than later and address how they can navigate through each level of agency (Toom & Husu, 2018). In addition, as teacher educators, we need to facilitate a collaborative climate in which novice and experienced teachers can practice and experiment with their professional agency, while practicing professional collaboration (Vesisenaho et al., 2023). As Juvonen and Toom (2023) point out referring to the Finnish context, "Constructing active and critical teacher's professional agency ultimately comes down to understanding the institution, one's own potential role in it, and which elements of the profession may be negotiated, and which ones may not."

In conclusion, there is an overwhelming need to provide more in-service teachers the tools and opportunities to acknowledge, practice and use their voices (expertise and agency), from the

Individual to the Societal levels of agency. Such critically reflective work creates the premises to grow a community of practitioners with decisional capital (Hargreaves & Fullan, 2012) and a more visible contribution to education policymaking (Campbell et al., 2017) for culturally sustaining practices that benefit all children.

We call for further research that focuses on how teachers develop and sustain their state of transformative agency for educational and social justice. As summed up by T1:

From a societal point of view, teachers have a great deal of power, which unfortunately not everyone on the ground is even aware of.

References

Act on Early Childhood Education and Care (540/2018)

Alim, H. S., Paris, D., & Wong, C. P. (2020). Culturally sustaining pedagogies: A critical framework for centering communities. In N. Suad Nasir, C. D. Lee, R. Pea, and M. McKinney de Royston (Eds.), *Handbook of the cultural foundations of learning* (pp. 261–276). Routledge.

Arvola, O., Pankakoski, K., Reunamo, J., & Kyttälä, M. (2021). Culturally and linguistically diverse children's participation and social roles in the Finnish Early Childhood Education - is play the common key? *Early Child Development and Care : ECDC*, 191(15), 2351-2363. <https://doi.org/10.1080/03004430.2020.1716744>

Atkin, M. (1994). Teacher research to change policy. In S. Hollingsworth & H. Sockett (Eds.), *Teacher research and educational reform* (pp. 103-120). Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Biesta, G.J.J. & Tedder, M. (2006). *How is agency possible? Towards an ecological understanding of agency-as-achievement. Working paper 5*. Exeter: The Learning Lives project.

Biesta, G., Priestley, M., & Robinson, S. (2015). The role of beliefs in teacher agency. *Teachers and teaching, theory and practice*, 21(6), 624-640. doi:10.1080/13540602.2015.1044325.

Brookfield, S. (1995). *Becoming a critically reflective teacher*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

Butera, F., Batruch, A., Autin, F., Mugny, G., Quiamzade, A., & Pulfrey, C. (2021). Teaching as Social Influence: Empowering Teachers to Become Agents of Social Change. *Social issues and policy review*, 15(1), 323-355.

- Calvert, L. (2016). *Moving from compliance to agency: What teachers need to make professional learning work*. Oxford, OH: Learning Forward & NCTAF.
- Campbell, C., Zeichner, K., Lieberman, A., & Osmond-Johnson, P. (Eds). (2017). *Empowered educators in Canada*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Coffman, A. N. (2015). Teacher Agency and Education Policy. *The New educator*, 11(4), 322-332. doi:10.1080/1547688X.2015.1087759.
- Dewey, J. (1933). *How We Think: A Restatement of the relation of reflective thinking to the educative process* (2nd edition). Lexington, MA: D.C. Heath.
- Eteläpelto, A., Vähäsantanen, K., Hökkä, P., & Paloniemi, S. (2013). What is agency? Conceptualizing professional agency at work. *Educational research review*, 10, 45-65. doi:10.1016/j.edurev.2013.05.001.
- Finnish Advisory Board on Research Integrity. *The Finnish Code of Conduct for Research Integrity and Procedures for Handling Alleged Violations of Research Integrity in Finland*. www.tenk.fi.
- FNAE [Finnish National Agency for Education]. (2019). National core curriculum for early childhood education and care. Regulation OPH-700-2022. Helsinki: Finnish National Agency for Education.
- Fox, R. K., Dodman, S., & Holincheck, N. (2019). Moving beyond reflection in a hall of mirrors: Developing critical reflective capacity in teachers and teacher educators. *Reflective practice*, 20(3), 367-382. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14623943.2019.1617124>
- Freire, P., & Ramos, M. B. (2017). *Pedagogy of the oppressed*. Penguin Books.

- Glaser, B. G., & Strauss, A. L. (2017). *Discovery of Grounded Theory: Strategies for Qualitative Research* (First edition.). Taylor and Francis.
- Gray, D. L., Hope, E. C., & Matthews, J. S. (2018). Black and Belonging at School: A Case for Interpersonal, Instructional, and Institutional Opportunity Structures. *Educational psychologist, 53*(2), 97-113. doi:10.1080/00461520.2017.1421466.
- Greeno, J. G. (2006). Authoritative, Accountable Positioning and Connected, General Knowing: Progressive Themes in Understanding Transfer. *The Journal of the Learning Sciences, 15*(4), 537-547.
- Hargreaves, A., & Fullan, M. (2012). *Professional capital: Transforming teaching in every school*. New York: Teachers College Press.
- Heikkilä, M., Iiskala, T., Mikkilä-Erdmann, M., & Warinowski, A. (2022). Exploring the relational nature of teachers' agency negotiation through master- and counter-narratives. *British journal of sociology of education, 43*(3), 397-414. doi:10.1080/01425692.2022.2038541.
- Hernandez, F., Endo, R., & Milner, H. R., IV. (2017). *Developing and supporting critically reflective teachers: Diverse perspectives in the twenty-first century* (1st ed. 2017.). Sense Publishers. doi:10.1007/978-94-6300-986-7.
- Hinnant-Crawford, B. (2016). Education Policy Influence Efficacy: Teacher Beliefs in Their Ability to Change Education Policy. *International journal of teacher leadership, 7*(2), 1.
- Jones, M., & Charteris, J. (2017). Transformative professional learning: An ecological approach to agency through critical reflection. *Reflective practice, 18*(4), 496-513. doi:10.1080/14623943.2017.1307729.

- Juvonen, S. & Toom, A. (2023). Teachers' Expectations and Expectations of Teachers: Understanding Teachers' Societal Role. In M. Thrupp, P. Seppänen, J., Kauko, & S. Kosunen (Eds.). *Finland's Famous Education System: Unvarnished Insights into Finnish Schooling* (1st ed. 2023., pp. 120-135). Springer Nature Singapore.
- Kangas, J., & Harju-Luukkainen, H. K. (2021). What is the future of ECE teacher profession? Teacher's agency in Finland through the lenses of policy documents. *The Moring Watch: Educational and Social Analysis*, 48-75.
- Karila, K. Kosonen, T. & Järvenkallas, S. (2017). Roadmap on the development of early childhood education for 2017–2030. Guidelines for increasing the degree of participation in early childhood education, and for the development of the skills of day care centre staff, personnel structure, and training. Publications of the Ministry of Education and Culture, Finland 2017. p. 30. <https://julkaisut.valtioneuvosto.fi/bitstream/handle/10024/80221/okm30.pdf> . Accessed 3 June 2024.
- Kauppinen, M., Kainulainen, J., Hökkä, P., & Vähäsantanen, K. (2020). Professional agency and its features in supporting teachers' learning during an in-service education programme. *European journal of teacher education*, 43(3), 384-404. doi:10.1080/02619768.2020.1746264.
- Kelly, D. M., & Brandes, G. M. (2001). Shifting out of “Neutral”: Beginning Teachers' Struggles with Teaching for Social Justice. *Canadian journal of education*, 26(4), 437-454. doi:10.2307/1602176.

- Kopisto, K., Salo, L., Lipponen, L. & Krofors, L. (2015). Transformations and tensions in Finnish early childhood education and care. In Kroll, L. R., & Meier, D. R. (Eds). *Educational change in international early childhood contexts: Crossing borders of reflection* (pp. 141-154). Routledge.
- Ladson-Billings, G. (2009). *The dreamkeepers: Successful teachers of African American children*. 2. ed.
- Ladson-Billings, G. (2011). Yes, but how do we do it? Practicing culturally relevant pedagogy. In *White teachers / diverse classrooms: Creating inclusive schools, building on students' diversity, and providing true educational equity* (2nd ed.), 33-46. Stylus Pub.
- Lavonen, J., Korhonen, T., & Juuti, K. (2015). Finnish teachers' professionalism is built in teacher education and supported by school site. *Hungarian educational research journal*, 5(3), 15-27.
- Lavonen, J. (2018). Educating Professional Teachers in Finland through the Continuous Improvement of Teacher Education Programmes. In Y. Weinberger & Z. Libman (Eds). *Contemporary Pedagogies in Teacher Education and Development* (pp. 3-22). <https://doi.org/10.5772/intechopen.71989>
- Linna, H. (2000). Kirjoittamisen suuri seikkailu: Prosessikirjoittaminen. [The adventure of creating a text: Process writing method.] Otava.
- Lipponen, L., & Kumpulainen, K. (2011). Acting as accountable authors: Creating interactional spaces for agency work in teacher education. *Teaching and teacher education*, 27(5), 812-819.

- Liu, K. (2015). Critical reflection as a framework for transformative learning in teacher education. *Educational Review*, 67(2), 135-157.
- Matikainen, M., Männistö, P., & Fornaciari, A. (2018). Fostering transformational teacher agency in Finnish teacher education. *International journal of social pedagogy*, 7(1).
- Mezirow, J. (1997). Transformative Learning: Theory to Practice. *New directions for adult and continuing education*, 1997(74), 5-12.
- Miles, M. B., Huberman, A. M., & Saldaña, J. (2019). *Qualitative data analysis: A methods sourcebook*. 4. ed.
- Molla, T., & Nolan, A. (2020). Teacher agency and professional practice. *Teachers and teaching, theory and practice*, 26(1), 67-87.
- Nieto, J. (2006). The cultural plunge: Cultural immersion as a means of self-awareness and cultural sensitivity among student teachers. *Teacher Education Quarterly*, 33(1), 75-85.
- Nolan, A., & Guo, K. (2022). Transforming practice through a professional learning program: Barriers and enablers. *Early years (London, England)*, 42(2), 232-246.
- Nonaka, I., and Takeuchi, H. (1995). *The Knowledge-Creating Company. How Japanese Companies Create the Dynamics of Innovation*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development. (2012). Starting Strong III: A quality toolbox for early childhood education and care. OECD Publishing.
- OECD. (2021). Starting Strong VI. *Starting Strong*. <https://doi.org/10.1787/f47a06ae-en>
- OECD (2023), *PISA 2022 Results (Volume I): The State of Learning and Equity in Education*, PISA, OECD Publishing, Paris, <https://doi.org/10.1787/53f23881-en>.

- Official Statistics of Finland (OSF). (2023). *Population structure* [e-publication]. ISSN=1797-5395. Helsinki: Statistics Finland [referred: 15.5.2024].
Access method: http://www.stat.fi/til/vaerak/index_en.html
- Pantić, N. (2015). A model for study of teacher agency for social justice. *Teachers and teaching, theory and practice*, 21(6), 759-778. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13540602.2015.1044332>
- Pantić, N., & Florian, L. (2015). Developing teachers as agents of inclusion and social justice. *Education Inquiry*, 6(3), 27311. doi:10.3402/edui.v6.27311.
- Priestley, M., Biesta, G., & Robinson, S. (2015). *Teacher Agency: An Ecological Approach*. (1st ed.). London: Bloomsbury Publishing Plc.
- Priestley, M., Biesta, G., & Robinson, S. (2016). *Teacher Agency: What Is It and Why Does It Matter?* doi:10.4324/9781315678573-15.
- Repo, E., Aerila, J., Tyrer, M., & Harju-Luukkainen, H. (2024). Multilingual learning environments in early childhood education in Finland. *Journal of Early Childhood Education Research*, 13(1), 221-248.
- Robinson, S. (2012). Constructing teacher agency in response to the constraints of education policy: Adoption and adaptation. *Curriculum journal (London, England)*, 23(2), 231-245. doi:10.1080/09585176.2012.678702.
- Samuels, A. J. (2018). Exploring Culturally Responsive Pedagogy: Teachers' Perspectives on Fostering Equitable and Inclusive Classrooms. *SRATE journal*, 27(1), 22-30.
- Schneider, K. (2012). *Becoming oneself. Dimensions of 'Bildung' and the facilitation of personality development*. Wiesbaden: Springer VS.

- Schwartz, D. L., & Okita, S. (2009). *The productive agency in learning by teaching*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University School of Education.
- Schön, D. (1995). The New Scholarship Requires a New Epistemology. *Change*, 27(6), p. 9.
- Sherfinski, M., Jalalifard, M., Zhang, J., & Hayes, S. (2019). Narrative Portfolios as Culturally Responsive Resistance to Neoliberal Early Childhood Teacher Education: A Case Study. *Journal of research in childhood education*, 33(3), 490-519. <https://doi.org/10.1080/02568543.2019.1630038>
- Statistics Finland. (2024, January 25). Immigration record high in Finland in 2023. Preliminary data on vital statistics by month of occurrence 2023M01*-2023M12* [Table]. Helsinki: Statistics Finland. Retrieved from <https://stat.fi/en/publication/clmixlq2e5fnt0bw60d4l2t7g>
- Toom, A., & Husu, J. (2018). Teachers' work in changing educational contexts: Balancing the role and the person. In *The teacher's role in the changing globalizing world*, eds H. Niemi, A. Toom, A. Kallioniemi, and J. Lavonen, 1–9. Leiden: Brill.
- Varpanen, J., Laherto, A., Hilppö, J., & Ukkonen-Mikkola, T. (2022). Teacher Agency and Futures Thinking. *Education sciences*, 12(3), 177-. <https://doi.org/10.3390/educsci12030177>
- Vesisenaho, M., Lakkala, M., Manu, M., Pöysä-Tarhonen, J., Kallunki, V., Kyllönen, M., . . . Häkkinen, P. (2023). Pre- and In-Service Teachers' Teamwork Behaviour in Integrated Teacher Training. *Journal of Teacher Education and Educators*, 12(1), 95.
- Yu, E. (2022). The Impact of Culturally Inclusive Pedagogy on Student Achievement in a Multicultural Urban School Setting. *Urban education (Beverly Hills, Calif.)*, 57(1), 135-153.

Zeichner, K. (2017). *The Struggle for the Soul of Teacher Education*. Routledge.

Zeichner, K. (2019). The Importance of Teacher Agency and Expertise in Education Reform and Policymaking. *Revista portuguesa de educação*, 32(1), 5-15. doi:10.21814/rpe.17669.

Table 1. *Data collected in chronological order*

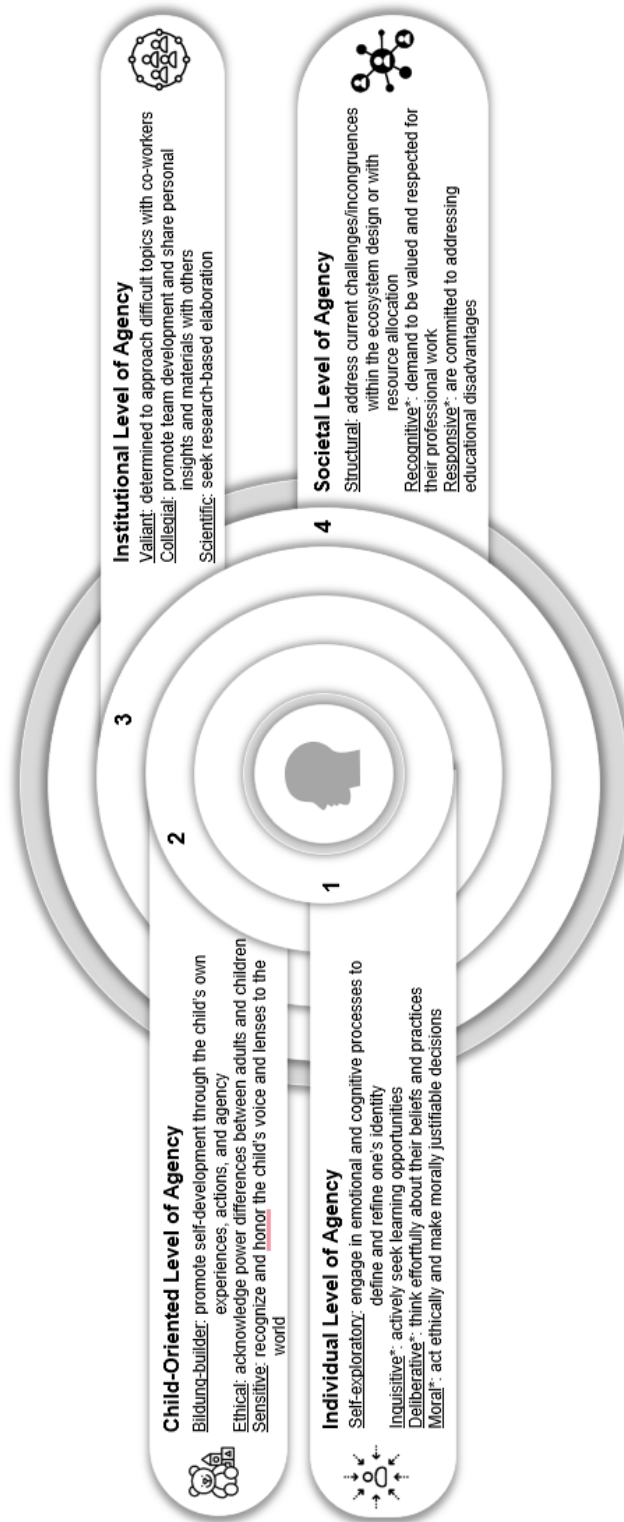
Type of data	T1	T2&3	T4	T5-8	T9	T10&11
Initial questionnaire	●	●	●	●		
Draft text	●	●	●			
Final text	●	●	●	●	●	●
Visual support	●	●	●	●	●	●
Final questionnaire	●	● ●	●	●		
Interview	●	●	●			

Table 2

Final influential texts by levels of agency

Text / Participant(s) Style	Main aspect of influence				Target audience			
	Individual	Child-Oriented	Institutional	Societal	Individual	Child-Oriented	Institutional	Societal
	Levels of agency							
Text 1 / T 1 Poem "A scream that no one hears"	●						●	
Text 2 / T 2&3 Blog post "Will you come and play with me?"			●				●	
Text 3 / T 4 Training material "How can different languages be seen and heard in the everyday life of a kindergarten? Only Finnish is spoken in the kindergarten!"			●				●	
Text 4 / T 5-8 Classroom poster "Hello, adult!"		●					●	
Text 5 / T 9 Essay "Meeting the child during the early childhood education and care day"		●					●	
Text 6 / T 10&11 Lobbying text "PISA and the cow's tail"				●				●
Levels of agency predominance (%)	17	33	33	17	0	83	17	

Figure 1. A four-level model for understanding the manifestation of teacher agency. * Operating facets of agency from Molla & Nolan (2020)



Acknowledgments

We thank all the participants in this study, the project coordinators Heidi Harju-Luukkainen and Maria Tyrer, as well as Nancy Commins and Emmanuel Acquah for all their valuable contributions to the discussions and comments which led to the improvement of the model of agency.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

Funding

This work was supported by the Finnish Cultural Foundation under Grant no. 00230225.