The dialectics of agency in educational ethnography

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ABSTRACT

This paper outlines a dialectical conceptualisation of children's agency for the purposes of multidisciplinary educational theory and practice. We illuminate five contradictory but connected dimensions of children's agency, or *the dialectics of agency*, identified from theoretical debate between sociologically and psychologically oriented educational literature: Agency (1) as enacted and imagined; (2) as situatively emergent and progressively developmental; (3) as dependence and separation; (4) as mastery and submission; and (5) as control and freedom. We examine these contradictions 'at work' in an ethnographic early education case study. We argue that the children's struggles towards agency and adults' efforts and failures to support children in their struggles can be conceptualised as a dialectical movement that has a potential to develop the educational practice itself. Our dialectical reading of both data and theory helps to highlight the challenges the practitioners face when supporting children's agency and the solutions they implement when doing so.

1. Introduction

A key aim of ethnographic research is to capture phenomena in all their fullness and complexity. Ethnographers are at the same time called to conceptualise and theorise the phenomena they study and engage in discussion with previous studies (Hammersley and Atkinson 2007; O'Reilly 2012). However, conceptualising this empirical complexity without reverting to a singular reading of the studied phenomena remains a challenging task for any educational ethnographer. This challenge is further accentuated by the fact that the central research concerns and phenomena studied by educational ethnographers require them to espouse a multidisciplinary stance, and working with multiple paradigms is often the starting point. In this article, we discuss this challenge in our ethnographic work with children's agency in educational settings.

The question of how to foster children who are responsible, reflective, and critical is a central and recurring educational concern. The import of agency is also mirrored in the current ethnographic educational research literature, in which children's agency is increasingly topicalised (e.g. Ayton 2012; Huf 2013). On a general level, agency refers to human beings' capacity to impact and eventually (collectively) transform their life circumstances and the practices in which they are engaged (Hofmann and Rainio 2007). However, agency

is a complex concept which has been conceptualised in very different, even conflicting ways in different research traditions. On the one hand, agency is a process of interaction with material resources, social institutions and the collective efforts of individuals. On the other hand, individual efforts and individuals' understanding of themselves as agentive can be seen as crucial for agency to become possible (Davies 1990).

Adopting a solitary perspective on agency from neighbouring research traditions runs the risk of unproductive empirical reductions of the educational reality. Therefore, in this study we apply a multidisciplinary reading of the concept. From the theories on agency, we draw from sociocultural and activity theory perspectives (e.g. Vygotsky 1978), critical psychology (Holzkamp 1991), sociology of childhood (Lee 2005; Prout 2005), poststructuralist and feminist research (e.g. St. Pierre 2000), and naturalistic social theory (e.g. Barnes 2000). Our interest is not to enter the debate on the nature and possibility of human agency in principle, but on the ways human agency becomes possible for different individuals, particularly for pupils in educational settings.

In order to use these multiple but sometimes conflicting, even contradictory theories in an empirical analysis, we will need a framework that conceptualises the complex and contradictory nature of phenomena. To this end, we have been informed by the dialectical tradition within which facing and resolving contradictions is at the core of human development (Tolman 1981; Baxter and Montgomery 1996; Engeström 1996). This dialectical conceptualisation of agency was originally introduced by Rainio (2010), and we will further develop, clarify, and reiterate it in this paper. We will introduce a case study of two seven-year-old girls, Helen and Sara, whose struggles for agency we follow and interpret in a play pedagogical setting called a playworld. Through this case study, we will show how a single theoretical reading of agency would not fully grasp children's and adult's struggles for agency in mundane educational interactions. Therefore, instead of a dualistic reading of both data and theory, we try to embrace the contradictions and their developmental potential both in data and in theory.

2. The framework of dialectics

The roots of modern dialectical thinking lie in the founding philosophical work of Hegel (1969) and Marx (1973) but the roots of dialectics can also be traced back to oriental philosophies (e.g. Taoism). In this paper, we draw on relational dialectics (Baxter and Montgomery 1996), which emphasises social life, particularly interpersonal relationships, along with practical material action. Importantly, relational dialectics can be described as ontological dialectics within which reality is understood as fundamentally consisting of opposing forces and their dynamics.

As ethnography, dialectics also aspires to approach phenomena holistically. In dialectics, this holism, or the 'principle of totality' (Baxter and Montgomery 1996), refers to the idea that phenomena in the world are always constituted in relation to other phenomena. From a dialectical perspective, phenomena, like agency, are not independent as such, nor pre-exist their relations (Tolman 1981). However, what sets dialectics apart from other holistic perspectives (e.g. contextualism and relationalism) is its focus on contradictions as a unit of analysis (Baxter and Montgomery 1996).

According to classical analytical logic, contradictions, antinomies, or paradoxes reflect the inherent weakness of the theory and its reasoning (Sainsbury 1995). An antinomy is

born when two valid arguments lead to contradictory conclusions. Accordingly, the conflicting definitions of agency that we identified in the literature about agency could be dismissed simply by viewing them as paradigmatic differences; tensions spring up, as agency is a concept used in various paradigms. Different disciplines and paradigms have different histories of, interests in, and viewpoints regarding human causation. By keeping the paradigms separate, we avoid contradictory conclusions. However, from a dialectical perspective, contradictions are understood as 'the dynamic interplay between unified oppositions' (Baxter and Montgomery 1996, 8) where oppositions are part and parcel of the same unified phenomenon. For example, individual autonomy and interpersonal relatedness are both oppositional aspects of personal relationships. In dialectical thinking, oppositional tendencies in social life presuppose each other for their very meaning (Baxter and Montgomery 1996). Moreover, phenomena are often not defined by just one oppositional binary, but rather can consist of many different oppositional pairs; enactment – imagined, dependence – separation, or mastery – submission, for example, can all be seen as oppositional elements of agency.

Identifying different oppositional pairs or dichotomies is not unique to dialectics (e.g. St Pierre 2011). Dialectics, however, emphasises the interplay between the opposing unities. That is, the 'both/and' takes on oppositions in dialectics accords the contradictory pair with a driving force through which the phenomenon is in a continual movement (Tolman 1981). In praxis, this interplay manifests as tensions, or challenges that participants feel or encounter. For an ethnographer, a relevant question is how people struggle with or manage these dynamics in their daily practices. While practitioners are often aware of and can describe many of the tensions, or challenges they face, this is not always the case even though the tensions might be readily available for the researcher (Baxter and Montgomery 1996). Furthermore, in dialectics, this acknowledgement and successful mastery of contradictions can be seen as the seed of development and change (see, e.g. Engeström 1987). Change here does not denote teleological or predictable change, but rather open-ended movement between stability and change in praxis (Baxter and Montgomery 1996). Even though dialectical tensions are momentarily overcome in particular circumstances, this success is transient; contradictions will emerge again as new challenges in practice and the movement continues.

In sum, the contradictions of agency that we have recognised in both our ethnographic work and in the theoretical literature around the concept of agency are not problems that we should overcome or avoid. Instead, we will try to depict how the movement between opposing poles of these dimensions constitutes the phenomenon we study. Describing this 'dance' will help us understand the challenges faced and the solutions devised by practitioners in the field. Furthermore, given that not all tensions or challenges might indicate contradictions in a dialectical sense, we will also critically examine whether the five presented dimensions of agency can be fully counted as dialectical contradictions.

3. The ethnography of the Brothers Lionheart playworld

In discussing the dialectics of agency – as recognised in the literature and in becoming visible for the ethnographer conducting field work – we will use examples from an ethnographic case study of a play pedagogical setting called a playworld. In the playworld, pupils and teachers explore different phenomena through taking on the roles of characters from a

story and acting inside the frames of an improvised plot. The pedagogy is based on Lindqvist's (1995) aesthetic play theory and Hakkarainen's (2008) narrative learning theory. Rainio (2010) conducted her ethnographic study in a Finnish mixed-age elementary school classroom in the school year 2003–2004. She followed the class, which took a dramatised journey inspired by the original story of the Brothers Lionheart, acting as villagers from Cherry Valley on their way to rescue the neighbouring Wild Rose Valley from the hands of the evil Tengil. The children and teachers engaged in this activity weekly for five months, acting in roles and changing their classroom into the world of the story. Video data were collected from the playworld activities and the weekly planning and evaluation sessions with the teachers. The focus was on individual students and their developing possibilities for agency in their participation in the creation of the playworld.

The playworld pedagogy (and an ethnographic study of it) makes visible the contradictions of agency discussed in this paper and allows their exploration in an educational context. That is, the playworld is a particularly interesting field of study for student agency as it aimed to provide a transitional and dialogical space in which both adults and children were forced to develop and assess their ways of acting and being together (Rainio 2010). However, at the same time the study of the playworld showed that the playworld pedagogy, which explicitly aimed at developing children's agency and collaboration, also contained several constraining elements. In this article, we will refer to the case of Helen and Sara, two seven-year-old girls, and their participation in the playworld as an example of how the attempts to ensure and advance children's agency in the classroom were complex and contradictory, not only for the teachers, but also for the children themselves, as well as for the researcher who tried to recognise these agentive efforts (for the original analysis of Helen and Sara's case, see Rainio 2009).

4. The dialectics between enacted agency and imagined agency

One of the central challenges that we faced as ethnographers researching children's agency was whether to lean mostly on what is visible or also on the thoughts, dreams, and ideas of the participants. As a concept, agency easily leads us to focus explicitly on the visible, active, and productive action in the material world. However, a disposition to dream, improvise, and imagine alternative ways and worlds, 'to formulate other social scenes in imagination' (Holland et al. 1998, 236), is also a crucial element of agency. The fact that this element is not visible in practical and productive action makes it harder to grasp in an empirical study, particularly when related to children (Rainio 2009). This is a challenge that requires the educator or parent to reflect on her or his efforts in fostering children's agency and to make decisions based on this reflection. It is far easier to recognise and support a child who is active and participatory than a child who withdraws, is passive or spends time in her or his own thoughts. One needs to be specifically sensitive in order to grasp the whole of agency, both as enacted and as imagined.

The contradiction between enacted and imagined agency was visible in our case study of Helen and Sara. In the Brothers Lionheart playworld, Helen and Sara took on the roles of the horses Grimm and Fyalar, powerful figures in Astrid Lindgren's original story. Horses and riding were important parts of these girls' free time. The playworld inspired the girls to create their own horse play in the class. However, the fact that horses do not speak and the pedagogical organisation of the small group work in the class (see Rainio 2009) made

it hard for these girls to contribute to the construction of the common playworld plot from their 'horse positions'. The girls' reaction to this disregard of their horse roles was to turn inwards and distance themselves from the class activity (cf. 'restrictive agency' Holzkamp 1991). In a sense, the girls turned to their imagination to create alternative realities, imagined 'figured worlds' where they could become agentive on their own terms (Holland et al. 1998). These private worlds took place on the sidelines of the collective playworld activity but were related to it and inspired by it. These micro-worlds, however, also isolated Helen and Sara as they were not acknowledged nor supported by others. In this sense, the enacted and imagined forms of agency seemed to oppose each other: the decision to withdraw ruled out the possibility to actively contribute to the class activity.

However, as the year progressed, Helen started also actively resisting the prevailing situation by generalising (cf. Holzkamp 1991) about the way girls and boys were treated in the playworld activity. For example, by acknowledging gender as an issue, Helen, along with a couple of other girls, complained to the teachers that boys were given more tasks and more central roles in the playworld. In this way, the girls finally made others – the teachers – react to them. In response, the adults arranged an episode with the dragon Katla in which the girls played a central role within the playworld plot. In terms of critical psychology, the girls' actions can be interpreted as a development of generalised agency (Holzkamp 1991), in which the girls questioned the taken-for-granted gender categories and used them as a tool to first assess their relation to the world and the possibilities that this relation offers, and then secondly to extend these possibilities (Tolman 1994). In short, the girls did have agency in breaking away from the gendered and restricting categorizations of the playworld.

Yet, if only this active and transformative action is taken as agency, as theories of agency focusing on active participation in shared activities would have us do (e.g. Holzkamp 1991, compare also the 'competent child' discourse, see, e.g. Ayton 2012), a large part of Helen and Sara's agency in the playworld would have been left out of the researcher's scope. Sara, for example, talked about her various fictive roles ('Happi, Volur, Tomppa') and their adventures in the story at the end of the playworld when she was interviewed, and none of these roles were visible in the observed video data nor known to her teachers. Rainio (2009) suggests that it was the private, inward-turning play activity that gave Helen and Sara not only joy but also the courage and self-awareness necessary to extend their possibilities for action by articulating to others how constrained the playworld was for them. Thus, to understand the development of these two girls' agency in the playworld, it was essential to capture this *dialectical movement* between these two different and seemingly opposing end points of agency: from turning inward and developing alternative realities in one's imagination ('restrictive' agency according to Holzkamp) to actually materially impacting and changing the existing situation ('generalised' agency). The ethnographic method with its aim to capture the complexity in the field makes this possible, but requires both very detailed analysis and longer time scales.

5. The dialectics between situative emergence and the progressive development of agency

Another challenge for us ethnographers trying to capture agency in real life events was whether to see agency as something continuous and enduring (the developmental or

psychological view) or rather as situational and contingent (the post-structural view). This central divide also appears in the literature. As is often taken up by post-structural theorists, the possibility to act agentically requires a subject position (e.g. Davies 1990; see also Ayton 2012). In this sense, agency is related to the local and changing social, material and discursive conditions surrounding us. But agency also requires understanding oneself as someone capable of acting in and transforming the taken-for-granted assumptions of the ways the world is organised and of one's own stance in this world (Hofmann 2008). To conceive of oneself as an agent whose actions count requires experience, learning, and development. Therefore, we argue that to understand children's agency in educational settings, we will need to see agency both as an emergent capacity of the developing person and a characteristic of interpersonal interaction (Martin 2004). Helen and Sara's case exemplifies this.

As explained above, Helen and Sara had often stayed in the background of the playworld, and as a result the researcher had initially paid no particular attention to their actions. However, by the end of the year, her interest in understanding Helen and Sara's agency was sparked by a surprising episode in the data. When viewing the recorded video material, Rainio noticed an episode in which Helen tried to enter the boys' play with the new and improvised role of a 'horse soldier' (see more in Section 7). As the researcher started to analyse the episode more closely, it became apparent that without locating the episode within the wider stream of actions in the playworld, it would have not made sense. All the recorded material on Helen and Sara needed to be taken into account in order to see how they were positioned and categorised by others, how adults and other children talked about them, how the girls responded, and how this interaction influenced the shape of the playworld events themselves along a longer time scale. That is, to understand Helen and Sara's agency in the playworld, the researcher crafted an interpretive narrative of the different but sequentially related situational manifestations of agency in the playworld interaction and their development over time. Only this dialectical ethnographic work of both constructing the developmental trajectory of the girls' participation in the playworld from over five months and interpreting the micro-interaction in certain playworld episodes revealed the complexity of these children's agency and helped to avoid a flat and simplistic interpretation of these girls' agency in the playworld. Although we need such narratives in order to make sense of the *in situ* actions of participants, these narratives always also constrain and confine our interpretation of the participants' agency.

In line with childhood studies (see Lee 2005; Prout 2005), we argue that when researching agency ethnographically, the situatively emergent (sociological) and the temporarily developing (psychological) views, which in literature often stay separate, should be combined. However, instead of looking for a compromising 'included middle' between the approaches, as Prout (2005) suggests, our approach suggests that these apparently oppositional theoretical stances actually *constitute each other* within the concept of agency and therefore form a dialectical unity. Ethnographic data should be analysed on these two levels simultaneously: (a) on the level of micro-interaction where the social reality is situationally constructed and (b) on the developmental level to grasp the continuity and development of these situational manifestations of agency (Rainio 2007).

6. The dialectics between dependence and separation

A third dialectical contradiction that we recognised in Helen and Sara's agency within the playworld took place between the need for belonging and the need for being independent. Helen and Sara clearly longed for recognition from others in the playworld activity and felt bad when this was not the case. At the same time, their need for their own, independently created play in which they were the main actors and agents started to isolate them from other children. This can be exemplified with a case in which Helen and Sara had organised a small play for other children. They decided to act it out in a stall they had built under a table, which was a central location of their horse activities. However, their play under the table was very private and hard to follow, although it had been meant as a public performance. The other children soon lost interest and this greatly upset the girls. The girls' needs for simultaneous privacy and recognition contradicted each other. However, for a sense of agency, both were needed: agency is both belonging to a community and separating from it.

This apparent contradiction between the dependent and separate individual can also be recognised in the literature about agency. Barnes (2000) argues that this contradiction actually stems from the fact that we do not take the idea of individual agency as a social status that is artificially distributed between people, but often as *a state* of being human. The idea of the independent and responsible individual is an important means through which a collective manifests its agency and creates institutional stability and order. This however has created fundamental problems related to the illusion of a detached and separable individual (see Lee 2005). The fact that we treat each other as independent and responsible individuals does not mean that we are such on an ontological level. Therefore, many researchers have started to conceptualise the context-dependent, relational, and distributed nature of agency: human agency is a 'hybrid' that can be understood only as a relation between different entities.

Ironically, highlighting the collective aspect of agency almost exclusively leaves aside the question of the access of different individuals to the practices of this collective agency. In such a view, agency becomes a matter limited to those who are already accredited as responsible agents and are thus already involved in the process of this distributed, social agency (Rainio 2010). Historically, groups that are not given the status of being responsible members of society have included, for instance, children (Davies 1990; Lee 2005). These groups have been considered to be irresponsible for their own actions and thus also outside of the collective agency. If we want to understand the question of agency as a complex phenomenon, we need to take such marginal and excluded groups and their struggle for agency into account in a way that does not imply a detached and individualistic but a relational and context-dependent view.

Here, a conceptual clarification made by Lee (2005) is useful. He distinguishes the concepts of separateness and separability. Lee shows convincingly how it is necessary in terms of dignity and human rights that we can be taken as persons separable from each other, but not as totally independent and separate from each other. In this way, claims Lee, the unfruitful opposition between dependence vs. separateness would turn into a question of separability and its functions in different social situations. Now, as ethnographers we claim instead that it is this dialectical dynamics and struggle for balance between dependence and separation that makes educational settings and learning and development so

interesting. Further, the pedagogical relationship (e.g. between teacher and pupil) can be examined from this perspective: what is fascinating in it is *the movement* between belonging and being independent and separate, and the fact that agency requires them both (Gillespie 2012). Teachers, parents, administrators, and children themselves need to define and negotiate in which situations children can be taken as responsible and in which not, and in what way not being taken as responsible for one's actions limits or does not limit how much one is heard and has a say in the activity that one is a part of. For an ethnographer who is trying to understand and depict the development of children's agency in educational settings, this dialectics should not be overlooked. In Helen and Sara's case, this dialectical movement constituted their agency. It was one of their central struggles in the playworld, one in which they would have needed more support. Helen's desire to belong and to find a more recognised position in the stream of the playworld activities led to the creative invention of a new character: the Horse Soldier. This role opened up for us a new layer in the dialectics of agency within the playworld, namely between mastery and submission. We will discuss this contradiction in agency next.

7. The dialectics between mastery and submission

Being an agentive member of a community, or society in general, often means taking part in renewing and developing the practices, traditions, and laws of that particular community. Yet, in order to do this, these same traditions and laws have to be learned and internalised. That is, from a cultural psychological perspective (e.g. Wertsch, Tulviste, and Hagstrom 1996), having agency to renew and transform a particular community means taking the time to learn and adopt the practices, tools, and conceptualisations of that particular culture. A similar kind of an apparent contradiction seems to characterise post-structuralism's subject:

> a subject that exhibits agency as it constructs itself by taking up available discourses and cultural practices and a subject that, at the same time, is subjected, forced into subjectivity by those same discourses and practices. (St. Pierre 2000, 502)

Thus, in order to have the agency to modify, alter, or resist existing structures and discourses, a subject also needs to subject to these discourses to a certain degree. The emergence of Helen's improvised 'horse soldier' character is a clear example of this dialectical dance between what we call mastery and submission. Just before the emergence of the 'horse soldier' character, Helen is sitting at a table with a group of girls preparing costumes for horses. At the same time, a group of boys is playing loudly in the corridor close to the girls' table. Their 'battle' is a continuation of a scene from the story that they had just dramatised together with their teacher. The teachers have earlier established this small group of boys to let the less loud and less wild boys of the class to safely experience alternative positions through playing the 'bad guys' in the group. The same kind of need had not been suggested for any of the girls; instead, it was considered that the girls 'know what they are doing'. While Helen is sitting at the table, the following interaction ensues:

> Data excerpt 1.

> 1. Helen: (preparing the mane for her horse role) A horse is ridiculous without ears! Your horse doesn't have ears. (Ella does not comment.)

2. Helen: (Rises from the chair, takes the mane and starts galloping on her knees shouting): The horse soldier, koppoti koppoti, the horse soldier!

3. Andy: (Comes and notices Helen. He shouts): Sam come see Helen! (Andy turns back to Helen): Helen, do it again, do it again please! You know, the way you did.

4. (Sam and Mikael come to follow as Helen gallops as a horse soldier. Andy is delighted and jumps up and down.)

5. (The teacher calls the boys, and Sam and Mikael go to her.)

6. (Helen gallops to another room.)

7. Andy: (Goes to the teacher, T3) Tina, Tina, Helen is acting as a horse soldier! (The teacher is working with somebody and does not pay attention to Andy's words.)

8. (Andy leaves the room.)

9. Helen: (Turns to the table and says to Ina and Ella) Now I got to make this look like a horse soldier. I AM a horse soldier. I looked good, didn't I? … I looked like a horse soldier. (She also looks at the camera when saying this.)

10. (Girls listen but do not comment. Helen starts to work with the ears for the horse.)

In the above episode, Helen expands her role as a horse with the help of the costume she is preparing. The invented horse soldier character reveals that she has quite cleverly mastered the valued and available discourses in the class/playworld. At the same time, in order to master these discourses she also needs to accept their gendered order. Turning her (femininely interpreted) horse role into a more masculine horse *soldier* role might give her a new possibility to join the more interesting play of the boys in the corridor. Later in this episode Helen actually tries to become involved in the battle play through her new horse soldier role. She neighs and gallops to Andy, grabs a horn that someone has dropped on the floor (an important artefact in the boys' play) and offers it to Andy. In this way, she reciprocally notices Andy in the way Andy has noticed her earlier. Unfortunately, Andy is no longer paying attention to Helen's actions. Soon another pupil, Emil, from the group notices Helen's presence and tells her that 'this isn't your game'. This makes Helen leave the play activity immediately.

In the original analysis of the event, Rainio (2009) interpreted Helen's actions as, with the help of her just invented and improvised role of a 'horse soldier', an attempt to escape the unsatisfying small group situation. In this role, she tried not to abandon but to combine the two worlds, that of horses and soldiers (of which a soldier seemed to be more valued in the playworld). This required a simultaneous mastery as well as submission to the available discourses and practices in the class.

For an ethnographer who is trying to grasp the living and moving emergence of children's agency, this dialectical dance between mastery and submission is important. The question is not whether individuals can be said in any absolute sense to have or not have agency, but whether or not there is 'awareness of the constitutive force of discursive practices and the means for resisting or changing unacceptable practices' (Davies 1990, 359). Helen had clearly mastered the available discourses and resources and also used them very creatively. At the same time, she had to submit to stereotypical and gendered practices and interpretations. Helen also lacked the social resources (Davies 1990) to make herself be taken seriously and supported. The world of 'horses' and the world of 'Tengil's soldiers' were not neutral but very gendered, as Helen soon realised when she was excluded by another pupil. Moreover, the teachers' pedagogical organisation of the classroom work closed her off from participation.

8. The dialectics between control and freedom

In the previous section, we described the dialectics of agency between mastery and submission from the agent's (Helen's) point of view. In this section, we will describe this dialectics from the point of view of a pedagogue or a pedagogical relationship. In the end, our ethnographic interest is in the process through which children's agency becomes possible and is supported in the daily activities in the classroom. In this, the teacher's role must also be examined.

The case of Helen and Sara has shown us that very small children can master different discourses and practices and navigate in them to find their place in the stream of classroom events. In the playworld data, Helen and Sara 'dance' very vividly within the dialectics of their agency, but what they seem to lack is concrete support and recognition, particularly from their teachers. Although the adults in this particular playworld were very sensitive to children's agency and set the children's well-being and initiatives as a starting point in the project, they still seemed to be limited by certain gendered interpretations of Helen and Sara's horse roles, and thus failed to support the girls in their struggle for recognition. We will interpret this contradiction (following Rainio 2010) by what we have called the dialectics between control and freedom – and this is the fifth dialectical dimension of agency that we introduce in this article. This contradiction between control and freedom has been conceptualised in many different ways in educational theory, starting from Immanuel Kant in the eighteenth century:

> One of the greatest problems in education is how subjection to lawful constraint can be combined with the ability to make use of one's freedom. For constraint is necessary. How shall I cultivate freedom under conditions of compulsion? I ought to accustom my pupil to tolerate constraint upon his freedom, and at the same time lead him to make good use of his freedom. (Kant, On Education 1803)

This contradiction has been called a paradox of pedagogy or an educational antinomy, dilemma, or practical contradiction of schooling. However, it has been rarely treated dialectically. The contradiction lies in the conditional and imbalanced nature of the adult–child relation: although the endpoint of education is the ability for agency and even when education explicitly aims at embracing the child's freedom in its practices, a pedagogical relationship always presupposes some form of coercion from the part of the adult. At the very least, prescribing agency as an endpoint for education undermines the agency of the child in the present. In educational practice, this contradiction appears as a simultaneous need for control and order and for the promotion of individual students' involvement and personal desires (see McNeil 1986; Rainio 2008). In different historical times, this contradiction has been solved in practice in different ways. The contradiction is also reflected in the long-term contestation between child-centred or progressive methods and more traditional authoritative views on learning and schooling. Lately in Finnish discussions about schooling, this contradiction between control and freedom has been seen as a central obstacle for classroom development and as impossible to overcome (e.g. Salminen 2012).

In this article, we claim, based on Rainio (2010), that the playworld intervention can be interpreted as an effort to solve or deal with this contradiction on a practical level. In the following example, one of the participating teachers reflects on this momentary resolution of the contradiction in her own work in the playworld:

Data excerpt 2: Teacher interview, 22.3.2006

Teacher: Being in character, with pedagogical awareness and a reflective touch there in the background all the time, well you cannot compare it to any other method. I mean many activities feel good, there are many very nice methods that I like, but the feeling here is completely different. Essential is that you are not the authority figure then, but more on the level of the child's imagination […] In those moments I feel that all formal matters fade away, all those things that disturb learning or make it a mere duty.

An objective set by the teachers in the playworld pedagogy was to offer the children wider possibilities for agency (e.g. inviting pupils to join in the planning and implementing of the playworld). However, ensuring the children's (and the teacher's) freedom in the playworld meant that it was simultaneously more difficult to ensure that all the children were heard and recognised, or that everyone found meaningful and satisfying positions in the playworld. Further, we argue that the pedagogical objective of creating a playworld that would particularly motivate and reach the most restless boys of the class meant that other, less visible and less active children were not given as much recognition (Rainio 2010). On the other hand, it was this open-ended quality of the playworld that invited pupils such as Helen and Sara to develop their own very motivating horse play within the playworld – although it also simultaneously limited their possibilities. This, we suspect, is very typical in a classroom with as many different needs and desires as there are students.

To conclude, freedom and control are not in a dualistic opposition but part of the same phenomenon dialectically. They are both needed in the realisation of agency, although they momentarily contradict each other. When they contradict, something new is always born. In the playworld, this dialectical movement became visible and negotiable, because the activity was open-ended and invited several different ways of participation, both for adults and for children. Perhaps what we are trying to say with our dialectical conceptualisation of agency is that whenever a teacher, a parent, or a pedagogue develops structures that aim to support and further children's agency, they must always also accept and acknowledge that this same structure creates new limits and boundaries for agency that cannot be controlled. For a researcher interested in this dialectics, depicting this movement is key.

9. Discussion

Researching and conceptualising educational phenomena without reducing their complexity to any particular theoretical reading is a challenging endeavour. While a particular theoretical perspective provides coherence and clarity, at the same time it runs the risk of overshadowing other contributing or contrasting perspectives and thus might prevent the researcher from understanding the phenomena under study in all its fullness. Employing multiple theoretical perspectives would therefore seem to be wise, but leaves open how to reconcile the differences, or even contradictions, between the perspectives. The phenomenon of agency is especially intriguing in this regard given its position as a boundary concept between historically dissenting disciplines such as sociology, psychology, and education (see Prout 2005).

In this paper, we have discussed this challenge in the context of our own work on researching children's agency in educational settings. We have also offered a dialectical

understanding of agency and its relevance for educational ethnography as a potential solution to this problem. In short, we have identified five dialectical contradictions regarding children's agency. We have examined how the children and adults (as well as researchers) in our playworld case move or *dance* between the apparently opposing poles of these contradictions while they seek agentive positions and struggle for recognition. For an ethnographer, the challenge is to capture and conceptualise this dance. Table 1 summarises our findings and the implications for ethnographic practice.

10. Conclusions

In dialectics, contradictions are understood as underlying practical activities and thus they manifest differently as tensions and challenges in local practice (Engeström and Sannino 2011). Although the challenges and tensions can be solved, the underlying contradiction remains 'at the core' of the phenomenon. In this fashion, researchers have argued that contradictions – or more precisely, their manifestation as tensions and challenges – gain their particular form and reflect the present historical moment of their emergence. Hence, the particulars of the contradicting process vary from one context to the other, and as a result, 'Dialectical scholars are thus obliged to study contradictions in situ at both universal and particular levels, in contrast to efforts that might seek to reduce contradictions to abstractions stripped of their localized particularities' (Baxter and Montgomery 1996, 17).

In this article, we analysed the tensions and challenges through which the presented contradictions of agency manifested in our ethnographic research site and also discussed their local solutions. Now, we wish to reflect on whether the five presented dimensions of agency can be fully counted as dialectical contradictions. In what follows we will shortly go through the contradictions outlined in this paper and weight their dialectical potential.

With the first contradiction, the enacted and imagined aspects of agency seem to oppose each other in the concept of agency, particularly in the theoretical discussions on agency. Understanding agency through active and productive action means that it cannot be simultaneously understood as withdrawal from action or as mere 'daydreaming'. Yet the case of Helen and Sara highlights how these enacted and imagined aspects of agency constitute each other. Helen's and Sara's initial response to the constraining situation in the playworld was to turn inwards, *away from* the enacted agency visible to others. At the same time, this possibility to imagine and develop parallel private micro-worlds also helped the girls to create a more personally meaningful stance in the playworld activity that led to more enacted agency in the playworld. Following a dialectical stance, this led us to argue that the developmental potential lies in the movement between the enacted and the imagined. Although we recognised methodological solutions to grasp this relation and movement in the data (see Table 1), the girls themselves also started to create novel ways to deal with this contradiction in practice. Helen, for example, developed her horse soldier role in a way that maintained the privacy of the horse play, but in a socially recognised context within the playworld (see Data excerpt 1).

The second contradiction of agency highlighted how having an agentive position in situ entails previous learning experiences and development that make this positioning possible. In the literature, however, the situational and the developmental aspect of agency represent often opposing theoretical perspectives. We exemplified the manifestation of this contradiction from the perspective of the researcher. For Rainio (2009), the agency in

Table 1. The dialectics of agency in the playworld.

The dialectics of agency between	Theoretical definition	Manifestation in Helen and Sara's case	Implications for ethnographic practice
(1) the enacted and imagined	Agency consists of both visible action and of seemingly passive imagining, dreaming and escaping	Sara stayed in the background throughout the playworld, and thus the various fictive characters she played went unnoticed by most of us. On the other hand, these invisible roles were inspired by participation in the playworld and could probably exist and flourish only in these girls' closed 'micro-world'	Observing and analysing visible action easily leads away from many less-visible forms of agentic actions that are not accessible to the researcher as easily. If this dialectics is to be depicted, multiple data collection methods need to be applied
(2) the situative and developmental	Agency is both situative as well as gradually developmental	The full scope of Helen's and Sara's agentive actions within the playworld became visible only through closely analysing certain micro-interaction events in relation to a five-month span of activities	Depicting this dialectics between agency as an interactionally emergent phenomenon and as the result of longer qualitative development that becomes visible only in a longer time scale requires video recordings for the analysis of micro-interaction but also time and investment in the field to depict the longer time scales
(3) dependence and separateness	Agency is both belonging to a community and separating from it	Although Helen and Sara longed for recognition in the playworld, their need for their own play started to isolate them from other children	The ethnographer interested in children's agency could benefit from paying attention to those situations in which there is a struggle or movement between belonging and taking distance
(4) mastery and submission	Agency requires submitting to existing cultural tools and discourses in order to master and alter them	Helen creatively expanded her participation in the playworld by having to submit her horse role to unsatisfyingly gendered categories and practices (e.g. the Horse Soldier)	The ethnographer interested in children's agency could benefit from paying attention to those situations in which the children both creatively use and master the existing discourses as well as when they submit themselves to them in order to master them
(5) control and freedom	An educator's support of children's agency requires both embracing their personal freedom and structuring and limiting it	Helen and Sara's horse roles in the playworld would have needed to be recognised and supported, but the structure of the playworld and the teachers' preset pedagogical objectives made this difficult. At the same time this freely structured playworld enabled these various positions	The ethnographer trying to understand children's agency could benefit from investigating the educational practices together with the practitioners, in order to identify situations in which this contradiction is faced, negotiated, and sometimes even locally overcome

the situated actions of Helen and Sara did become interpretable only through constructing a longer time scale narrative of the girls' actions as part of the playworld. In this sense, the second contradiction could be arguably more endemic to the researcher's task of understanding children's emerging agency in the playworld. More to the point, given what we have learned so far, it is hard to imagine how this contradiction could emerge again in research praxis. That is, while the theoretical debate between situative and

developmental approaches to agency continues to exist, for us, putting our methodological solution to good use in future research endeavours seems to overcome this opposition. In this sense, the second contradiction would seem to be more of an apparent one rather than a fundamental unity of oppositions from the researcher's perspective.

With respect to the third dialectical dimension, the contradiction between dependence and separation, as Barnes (2000) and Lee (2005) suggest, it can be solved *semantically* by talking about separability instead of separateness. However, while this semantical solution diffuses the contradiction theoretically, the dialectical dance between belonging and independence remains at the heart of people's struggles for agency. For Helen and Sara, it was one of the central struggles in which they clearly would have needed more support. They articulated that they wanted to be seen and heard more in the playworld (belong), but they also wanted to play privately on their own terms (stay separate). We contend that acknowledging this contradiction and the dance between its poles in children's lives within school would give teachers more tools to work with and would help in developing children's agency. In our own work, we have begun to explore how what in classrooms is easily interpreted by teachers as disruptive or disinterested behaviour can be alternatively seen as a form of student ambivalence by simultaneously displaying a need to belong and withdraw from the activity. By accepting and supporting these expressions of ambivalence teachers could create more flexible social norms for participation and thus space for students' agency (see Rainio and Marjanovic-Shane 2013; Ferholt and Rainio 2016).

Our fourth contradiction, between mastery and submission, seems also to hold its ground as a dialectical contradiction. According to our reading of cultural psychological and post-structural literature, the skilful use of cultural tools is constitutive of agency. However, in order to use these tools, the agent also needs to invest time to learn how to use them, and more fundamentally, to accept the power the tools have over the agent. That is, mastery flows reversibly from yielding oneself to the affordances of the tools. In the case of Helen, we could see this dance between mastery and submission in her creative implementation of the 'horse soldier' role; however, this also meant submission to the stereotypical roles in the classroom.

Finally, the formulation of our fifth contradiction of agency stipulated that educational practices that aspire to enable children's freedom also always place new constraints on them. In our study, the playworld itself was an effort to solve this contradiction. It offered the teachers fictive roles through which they could momentarily step outside their institutional teacher roles to leave more space for student agency to develop (Rainio 2010). However, ensuring the children's freedom in the playworld meant that it was simultaneously more difficult to ensure that *all* children were heard and recognised, or that everyone found meaningful and satisfying positions in the playworld. Managing the playworld within the institutional constraints of formal schooling and keeping it safe and meaningful for all meant that the teachers had to step back and forth between their flexible fictive roles and a more directive teacher role. Nevertheless, the contradiction was momentarily overcome in the playworld interaction, as evidenced in the presented teacher interview. As we have also argued elsewhere (Rainio 2010; Rainio and Hilppö 2015), this fifth contradiction between freedom and control can be taken as a dialectical contradiction in its 'strictest' sense. That is, although the contradiction was locally solved in the playworld, the solution was only momentary and thus the contradiction had to be faced again later in a new form.

The identification of dialectical contradictions has bearing on educational practice and teachers' work. For example, without recognising how the contradiction of agency between control and freedom manifests in their work, the day-to-day work of teachers can be very frustrating and can potentially lessen their interest in developing their practice (see McNeil 1986). Frustrations often lie in the simultaneous and overlapping requirements to maintain control, be responsible adults *and* further children's independence and creativity. Analysing and recognising that the roots of such frustrations lie in central ontological contradictions inherent in the phenomenon of agency (and therefore at the heart of the pedagogical relationship that aims to further agency of children) may help educators to see that collectively facing and locally solving different manifestations of these contradictions will have developmental potential regarding their practice.

The ways in which these contradictions manifest in different pedagogical and educational situations, if at all, and how people face and solve these tensions in their daily life should be a matter of new empirical investigations. In our own work, we have begun to address this question by analysing interactions between teachers and pupils in other educational settings (Ferholt and Rainio 2016; Rajala et al. 2016). Furthermore, given the limited range of our current empirical work, other possible dialectical dimensions relating to children's agency could be identified and conceptualised in other educational settings, and the ones we have recognised here could (and should) be contested.

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