



FACULTY OF EDUCATION
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HOW CHILDREN LIVE THEIR AGENCY IN FOREST PRESCHOOL ENVIRONMENT

(An exploratory case study on children's agency in
forest preschool settings in the Czech Republic)

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Supervisor:	Ernst Thoutenhoofd
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Abstract

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The aim of this study is to explore and depict how children exercise their agency in everyday life of a forest preschool in the Czech Republic and what perspectives they have on their own agency. The studied theme, children's agency is approached through theoretical perspectives of the sociology of childhood. The study is designed as an exploratory single case study, employing participant observation and open-ended interviews in the form of focus groups as methods. The collected data are examined by qualitative content analysis. The study attempted to enrich the research arena with exploring agency from the perspective of children. The findings of the study demonstrate that the children's agency is multifaceted concept that is dynamic, oscillating on the continuum of events of everyday life. The constant flow of reduction and expansion of the space for agency due to socially constructed characteristics of the preschool brings forth different manifestation of agency. In this way, children exercise their agency in complying to or challenging the rules of the preschool as well as in negotiating. The findings also indicate that children perceived the outdoor environment as a place where they can exercise their agency most freely and do their childhood due to the wide opportunities for free and unattended play that the outdoor environment offers. Also, the agency manifested greatly in child-initiated activities within their free play and when children were given time and space by teachers to lead and develop the activities. As the forest preschool environment and the realm of ECEC are rather rarely subjects of research in the Czech Republic, the conducted study shows that these arenas are worth studying as it can shed lights on important themes such as the process of exercising children's agency, building their own identity and well-being, together with the sense of belonging to the place, community, and connection to nature.

Foreword

The thesis has taken me to a long journey, and I would not be able to finish it without the support I have received on the way. Therefore, I would like to express my gratitude to everyone who encouraged me or just simply were there with me.

At first, I would like to thank my supervisor Ernst Thoutenhoofd for his patience and trust in my ability to accomplish it and for giving me the time and space I needed, for his immense listening and support and wise advises and witty comments that helped me navigate the writing.

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“I have never tried that before, so I think I should definitely be able to do that.”

Pippi Longstocking, Astrid Lindgren

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List of Abbreviations

CSI – Czech School Inspectorate

ECEC – Early Childhood Education and Care

FEP PE – Framework Educational Programme for Preschool Education

MEYS – Ministry of Education, Youth and Sports

MoLSA – Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs

SEP – School Education Programme

UNCRC – UN Convention on the Rights of the Child

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Introduction

Notion of agency is nowadays seen as a complex and multifaceted concept that has been theorized within several disciplines, such as psychology, philosophy, sociology, pedagogy, neuroscience and others. The notion of children's agency started to emerge in late 1970s by questioning the prevailing Jean Piaget's concept of child development and the notion of seeing children as immature and therefore dependent having passive 'silent' role in a society (Ivashkevich, 2012; James & Prout, 2015; James & James, 2004). Also, the adoption of UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) in 1989 has supported in a way the voices advocating for children's active participation as social actors (Musinguzi & Ellingsen, 2017; McMellon & Tisdall, 2020). However, soon after critical voices mainly from the sociologist of childhood were raised that even though children's agency was broadly accented in the twentieth century, the agency of children was often controlled and limited in many social contexts (James & James, 2004). As a result, the sociology of childhood has brought a debate about 'reconstructing' childhood and a call for a new paradigm (James & Prout, 2015) viewing children as active in constructing their social relations and lives around them and children's agency as ability to act creatively and to make things happen (James, 2009). Also, as the sociology of childhood has accented the importance of studying childhood and children's social relationships from their stance, not only from the perspective of adults, and continued to critically elaborate the concept of agency throughout the years, I selected it as the theoretical background to this study.

Consequently, within the research field, the notion of a child as an agentic being has been studied since it emerged. In preschool/primary school arena, several studies have been conducted on this theme but rather from the perspective of adults/teachers and their pedagogical efforts to enhance child's agency/competency (Ayton, 2012; Ellegaard, 2004; Houen, Danby, Farrell & Thorpe, 2016; Månsson, 2008; Sandberg & Eriksson, 2010; Sheridan & Pramling Samuelsson, 2001). However, this positioning of a group on one side (adults) who shall 'enable' another group on other side (children), although often stated as in child's best, naturally brings the uneven distribution of power between these two groups and thus, still upholds the passive role of children and their free play and choice, participation or decision-making is often defined by the adults (Wood, 2014). Other studies also from teachers' perspective emphasize the importance of empowering children through listening to them, through concentrating on creating space for children's voices to be expressed and heard and act upon them (Davies, 2014; Binder, 2015; James & Prout, 2015). Also, there has been identified a need for space for children to reflect on their agentic actions and voices and develop their understanding of their sense of agency and perspectives on their own agency (Garvis, Ødegaard, & Lemon, 2015; Hilppö, Lipponen, Kumpulainen, & Virlander, 2016; Määttä and Järvelä, 2013; Robson, 2010). However, only few research studies concentrated on capturing the children's experience of agency (Caiman & Lundegård, 2014; Markström & Halldén, 2009; Rainio, 2010).

In the Czech Republic, research within ECEC is rather scarce (Průcha, 2016) and the term children's agency is neither explicitly elaborated in the current official strategic documents (the Strategy 2030+, issued 2020) nor in any official curricular documents. Nevertheless, the term might be on its rise within Czech ECEC research as the literature search identified two follow-up studies concentrating on preschool-aged children's agency in shared book reading situations in Czech families (Gavora, 2016, 2022). Thus, the study is situated in the Czech preschool setting intentionally. Moreover, having teaching experience from Swedish preschools, it awakes my curiosity to explore the situation in Czech preschools, as the notion of agency or any related terms such as enhancement of children's rights, responsibility and autonomy do not have as long tradition within the education and Czech society as it has in Nordic countries, Sweden particularly. Furthermore, the specific type of preschool setting, the

forest preschool is selected purposely as well. In nowadays Czech Republic, there has been a growing number of newly established forest preschool institutions, especially over last seven years when they could reach a status of a preschool registered under by the Ministry of Education, Youth, and Sport (MEYS) and thus became even more a sought-after alternative for many parents. Also, studies within Czech forest preschool institutions have been rarely conducted considering not even ten years of their existence.

Hence, the proposed single case study concentrates on children's agency in Czech forest preschool in attempt to explore how children exercise their own agency in daily interaction with their peers and teachers. It also investigates what perspectives they have on their agency.

In line with the current accents on the studied phenomena in the contemporary research and by the international bodies such as the OECD (the project Future of Education and Skills 2030), I consider the presented study as up-to-date and significant. As ECEC and forest preschool environment are not widely researched arenas in the Czech Republic, the study can shed light on the themes not yet explored in this country.

The structure of the thesis is as follows. In Chapter 1, I begin with a background for the notion of children's agency. Firstly, I briefly state some initiatives that impacted the evolvement of the studied theme internationally. Secondly, I present a current project by the OECD highlighting explicitly the student agency and continue with a depiction of children's agency in several curricular documents for ECEC. As last, through the optics of children's agency, I look at the current Czech educational strategies and curricular document for preschool education. In Chapter 2, I anchor the studied theme in the sociology of childhood and mention current trends and challenges in conceptualisation of children's agency within this theoretical background. In the Chapter 3, I continue elaborating the theme on the background of current research studies. In Chapter 4, I attempt to briefly outline the conceptual foundations of the study deriving from the theoretical background and literature review. Chapter 5 sets the context of the study, the ECEC in the Czech Republic including Czech forest preschool education whereas Chapter 6 states the research task and research questions. Chapter 7 describes methodology employed. In Chapter 8, the research site is shortly introduced before Chapter 9 starts with presentation of the findings of the study. Chapter 10 follows with discussion based on findings in a broader context. Chapter 11 identifies limitations of the study and implication for the further research and the thesis is closed by Conclusion.

1 Background

The concept of children's agency started to emerge in late 1970s by questioning the prevailing Jean Piaget's concept of child development: the notion of seeing children as immature and therefore dependent having passive 'silent' role in a society (Ivashkevich, 2012; James & Prout, 2015; James & James, 2004). Further, the adoption of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) in 1989 by the UN General Assembly, followed by ratification in many countries, has brought to the concept of children's agency another dimension of children's rights to exercise their own agency (Abebe, 2019; Hart, 2008; Kirby, 2019; Musinguzi & Ellingsen, 2017; Tisdall, 2015) through the concept of participation rights. Article 12 (respect for the views of the child) is considered as covering the main principle of the UNCRC, though there are several more Articles, particularly Article 13 (freedom of expression), 14 (freedom of thought, belief, and religion), 15 (freedom of association) and 17 (access to information) that are often connected to participation rights of children (McMellon and Tisdall, 2020, p. 159). Also, from the early 1990s, agencies concentrating on developmental aid to children worldwide such as UNICEF and Save the Children raised the focus on the potential of children's participation (Hart, 2008).

Later, the UN Millennium Summit (2000) focused on the theme of children's agency as well. Subsequently, the concepts of children's agency, children's awareness of their own rights and responsibilities and the active participation in their learning and life in broader perspective became increasingly recognized internationally. Following, in the UN Special Session on Children in 2002 and later the outcome document 'A World Fit for Children', one of the objectives of the declaration is explicitly named as "Listen to children and ensure their participation" (p. 3) and further in 'Plan of Action' is stated, "the right of children [...] to express themselves freely must be respected and promoted and their views taken into account in all matters affecting them...they can actively take part in shaping their environment, their societies and the world they will inherit" (p. 7).

Further, in the UN Sustainable Development Goals is explicitly declared that "children and young women and men are critical agents of change and will find in the new Goals a platform to channel their infinite capacities for activism into the creation of a better world" (United Nations, 2015, p. 12).

Consequently, several models of children's and young people's participation started to appear. Departing from the concept of Eight Rungs on the Ladder of Citizen Participation introduced first by Arnstein in 1969, Hart put forward a ladder of children's participation, firstly published in 1992. Each rung of the ladder (8 in total) represents the level of children's participation in activities and decision making, the higher rungs, the greater children's participation whereas the first three rungs from the bottom were identified as non-participation (Hart, 1992, p. 8). As Hart's model was criticized for the hierarchical structure, Treseder in 1997 altered the model into a circular diagram and left behind the first three non-participatory categories. However, neither model addressed the power relation between children and adults as standing opposed to one another, context defined by socio-economic, political, cultural, and organisational factors and changes over time (McMellon & Tisdall, 2020, p. 161). Shier (2001) strived to overcome the drawbacks of Hart's ladder of participation and adapted it into his model of Pathways to Participation: Openings, Opportunities and Obligation. He identifies 5 levels of participation and within these levels 3 stages of commitment (Shier, 2001, p. 111). He aimed the model as a set of questions, an instrument to support any organisation to enhance the children's and young people participation within the organisation. Despite critiques and identified shortcomings, Hart's concept became highly popular and up to date is still cited and applied as evidenced in the current project

Future of Education and Skills 2030 of the OECD. The Hart's ladder concept is adapted there in the OECD Sun Model of Co-Agency (see below Figure 2).

In the following paragraphs, I further elaborate the OECD project, the conceptual framework for learning 2030, the OECD Learning Compass for 2030, that highlights the student agency as a crucial concept. I briefly introduce the concept of co-agency as well. Then, I continue with examining several national curriculums for ECEC and their reflection of children's agency within the text. Lastly, I look at the current Czech educational strategies and curricular document for preschool education through the optics of children's agency.

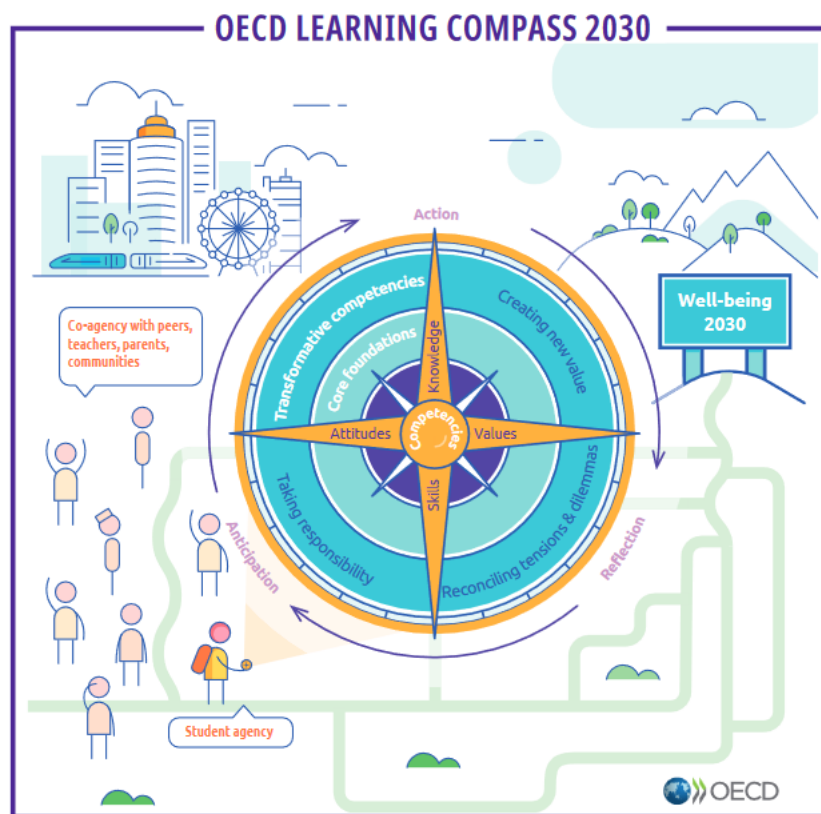
1.1 Children's agency in the OECD Future of Education and Skills 2030

In 2015 the OECD has launched the Future of Education and Skills 2030 project where the first phase focuses on developing conceptual frameworks for learning 2030 that can be used for redesigning curriculums. Phase 2 concentrates on developing a conceptual framework for teaching 2030 and implementation of new curriculums. The OECD Learning Compass for 2030 (see Figure 1) is the conceptual framework for learning 2030 and is accompanied by Conceptual Learning Framework – Student Agency for 2023 and other conceptual papers elaborating the concepts employed in the Learning Compass. The concept of agency is stated as rather difficult to be defined in general terms, but it is seen as applicable in every context of education and therefore essential. Thus, the student agency is described as "...the capacity to set a goal, reflect and act responsibly to effect change. It is about acting rather than being acted upon; shaping rather than being shaped; and making responsible decisions and choices rather than accepting those determined by others..." (OECD, 2019, Conceptual learning framework – Student Agency for 2030, p. 2).

Elsewhere in another concept note accompanying the Learning Compass agency is defined as: "...competency to think, initiate and act intentionally and responsibly to shape the world towards individual and collective well-being..." (OECD, 2019, Conceptual learning framework – Anticipation-Action-Reflection Cycle for 2030, p. 7). One of the key points is that "agency implies having the ability and the will to positively influence one's own life and the world around them" (ibid., p. 2). The document addresses the difficulties in defying the student agency across cultures, including the fact that there is no direct translation of the term in many languages (e.g. Czech language). However, the overarching general 'definition' of student agency is stated as "students' ability to play an active role in their education" (ibid., p. 7).

Further, it is emphasised that "...student agency implies a sense of responsibility as students participate in society and aim to influence people, events, and circumstances for the better..." (OECD, 2019, Conceptual learning framework – Student Agency for 2030, p. 4).

Figure 1. The OECD Learning Compass for 2030



Source: OECD (2019). Future of Education and Skills 2030, Concept Note: Student Agency.

To be an agent in learning is understood as to “...play an active role in deciding what and how they will learn...” (ibid., p. 5). There is seen a greater value as being agentic as it is believed to be tightly connected to development of a pivotal skill – to learn how to learn, which extends beyond the school system to life at large. Thus, it departs from a standpoint that student agency is not a personality feature, nor an equivalent to categories such as student autonomy, student voice or choice. It is seen rather as a capability that is “malleable and learnable” (ibid., p. 4). Further key constructs are mentioned to be related directly with student agency such as “development of identity and sense of belonging, ..., motivation, hope, self-efficacy and a growth mindset, ..., sense of purpose...” (ibid., p. 5). Student agency is also given in relation to different contexts where it can be practiced and developed – moral, social, economic, creative. Accordingly, the student agency is described as consisting of moral, social, economic, and creative agency. These different agencies are seen as being foundations for development of further competencies called Transformative Competencies: creating new value, reconciling tensions and dilemmas, and taking responsibility.

Moreover, student agency is seen as both a learning goal and a learning process; the learning goal in a way of developing a sense of self, a sense of purpose and beliefs that “they can fulfil that purpose by setting goals and taking action to achieve those goals” (ibid., p. 5). Agency as a learning process is perceived as an action that continues and develops throughout a life and it is in circular manners – the more agentic the person is in their learning, the higher motivation has towards learning, setting goals and reaching his/her learning objectives.

The concept of agency is approached from the socio-ecological developmental perspective. It is viewed as a relational process, not a personality quality but as "...a phenomenon that emerges through the unique interplay of individual capacity and the socio-cultural structures in which it is enacted" (Schoon, 2018, p. 8). Also, it is "...build on reciprocal interactions with others" (ibid., p. 19).

The relational feature of agency leads to another crucial concept of the framework, the concept of co-agency. It describes the process of co-creation of the teaching-and-learning process by students and teachers together, in a wider perspective together with parents and communities as well. Co-agency also named as "collaborative agency" is then defined as "...interactive, mutually supportive relationships with parents, teachers, the community, and with each other – that help students progress towards their shared goals" (ibid., p. 2). It is claimed that "an effective learning environment is built on co-agency" (ibid., p. 7). Naturally, it replaces the traditional linearity of the teaching-learning process (teacher to student) with a fluid mode where "everyone can be considered a learner, not only students but also teachers, school managers, parents and communities" (ibid., p. 7).

In line with it, the adaptation of Hart's model of children's participation is created in the circular manners, the image of a ladder and ladder rungs is replaced by an image of a sun and sunrays (see Figure 2).

Figure 2. The OECD Sun Model of Co-agency

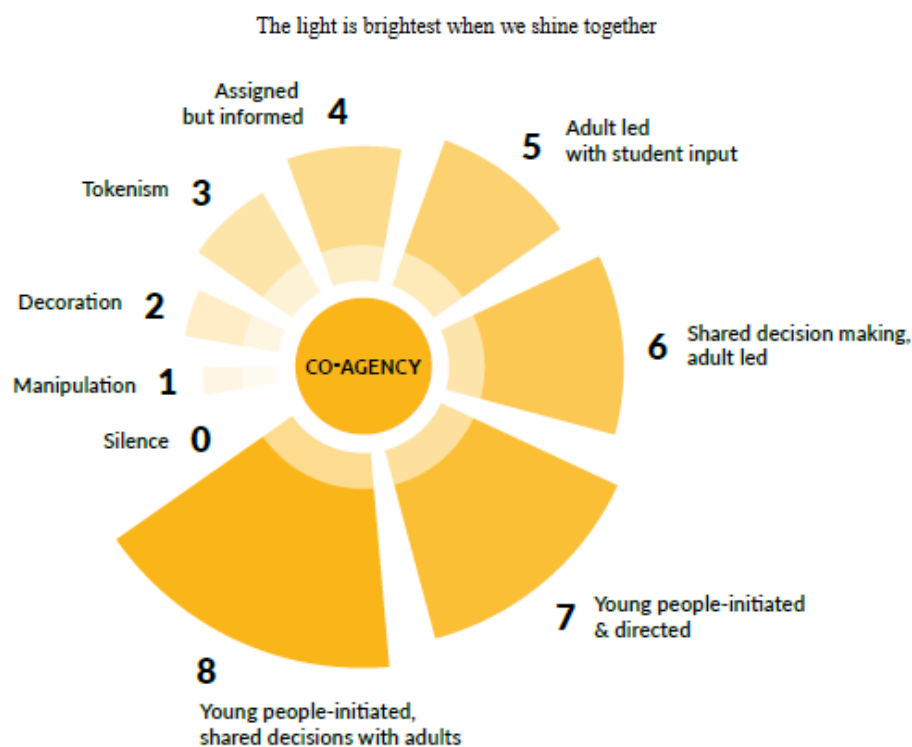


Table 1. Degrees of co-agency

0. Silence	Neither young people nor adults believe that young people can contribute, and young people remain silent while adults take and lead all initiatives and make all decisions.
1. Manipulation	Adults use young people to support causes, pretending the initiative is from young people.
2. Decoration	Adults use young people to help or bolster a cause.
3. Tokenism	Adults appear to give young people a choice, but there is little or no choice about the substance and way of participation.
4. Assigned but informed	Young people are assigned a specific role and informed about how and why they are involved, but do not take part in leading or taking decisions for the project or their place in it.
5. Adult led with student input	Young people are consulted on the projects designed, and informed about outcomes, while adults lead them and make the decisions.
6. Shared decision making, adult led	Young people are a part of the decision-making process of a project led and initiated by adults.
7. Young people-initiated and directed	Young people initiate and direct a project with support of adults. Adults are consulted and may guide/advise in decision making, but all decisions are ultimately taken by young people.
8. Young people-initiated, shared decisions with adults	Young people initiate a project and the decision making is shared between young people and adults. Leading and running the project is an equal partnership between young people and adults.

Source: OECD, Student Focus Group (2019). In OECD Future of Education and Skills 2030, Concept Note: Student Agency.

1.2 Children's agency in several national curriculums for ECEC

Naturally, the concept of children's agency and/or children's participation rights started to emerge in the educational strategies and national curricular documents. When we look at the national curricular documents for early childhood education and care, the term 'agency' could have been explicitly found already in 2009, in Australian official educational document and is defined as "being able to make choices and decisions, to influence events and to have an impact on one's world" (Belonging, Being and Becoming: The Early Years Learning Framework for Australia, 2009, p. 64). There is also a direct reference to the UN Convention: "The Convention also recognises children's right to play and be active participants in all matters affecting their lives" (Belonging, Being and Becoming: The Early Years Learning Framework for Australia – V2.02, 2022, p. 5). Throughout the whole curriculum the children are approached and described as active 'creators' of their identity, learning and life in general. The curriculum within its vision for children's learning operates with a concept of Belonging, Being and Becoming. Belonging brings a theme of "children's interdependence with others and the basis of relationships in defining identities" (ibid., p. 6). The 'being' highlights the 'here and now' that the early childhood education is not only preparation for the future, but also it is time for "children knowing themselves, developing their identity...engaging with life's joys and complexities, and meeting challenges in everyday life... (ibid., p. 6). Naturally, the theme of becoming accents the learning and growing process in early childhood but again, the child is seen as an active participant as the facilitation of the learning process is determined in collaborative manners among educators, families, and children themselves. Moreover, the vision continues with determining five learning outcomes that significantly set the accent on children being active and independent since the early age: "Children have a strong sense of identity, Children are connected with and contribute to their world, Children have a strong sense of wellbeing, Children are confident and involved learners, and Children are effective communicators" (ibid., p. 7). The concept of agency is explicitly mentioned and elaborated in the first learning outcome, Children have a strong sense of identity, that is further developed into further sequels such as "Children develop their emerging autonomy, inter-dependence, resilience and agency; Children develop knowledgeable, confident self-identities and a positive sense of self-worth" among others (ibid., p. 31).

Also in Nordic countries, seeing a child as an agentic being with her/his own rights and abilities to take responsibility for themselves, calling such child 'the competent child', has had a long tradition even before ratification of UN Convention on the Rights of the Child. This is seen naturally embodied in the concept of Nordic welfare state (Brembeck, Johansson, & Kampmann, 2004).

In Swedish official educational document for preschool education, the term agency is not used but the notion can be sensed under the terms children's participation and influence on the content and daily activities in early childhood practices already in the National Curriculum for Preschools from 1998. Among main goals stated, there is 'Influence of the Child', elaborated further as children "have the opportunity of influencing their situation [...] having real influence over working methods and content of preschool [...] take greater responsibility for themselves and their participation in the group of children" (Curriculum for the Pre-school, Lpfö 98/10, p. 12). In the recently revised Curriculum for Preschools (issued August 23, 2018, in force from July 1, 2019) is the theme of children's participation and influence over their education and being in preschool even more emphasized as it is stated that "children have the right to participation and influence" (Curriculum for the Pre-school, Lpfö 18, p. 5). Throughout the text there can be found explicit references to these concepts, not only as among preschool goals, but also among guidelines for preschool teachers, the preschool work-team and the headmaster and their responsibilities. Also, the particular goal has been renamed (the word 'participation' was added) 'Participation and Influence of the Child' so it can be assumed that a bigger stress shall be laid on child's active involvement in the daily preschool practice and education (ibid., p. 17). Moreover, the reference to UN Convention on the Rights of Child is mentioned in the new curricular text, in the part 'Fundamental values and tasks of the preschool' as "the preschool should reflect the values and rights expressed in the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child" and that "children should be made aware of their rights" (ibid., p. 5).

The Finnish official document, the National Core Curriculum for ECEC (2022) has been revised very recently and thus, in line with many recent strategic educational documents, the term agency is explicitly mentioned within ‘Mission and general goals of early childhood education and care’ as being connected with learning: “Knowledge and skills acquired in ECEC strengthen children's participation and active agency in the society” (p. 11). Further in the document, it is elaborated that “...the conception of learning is also based on a view of the child's active agency...Children are naturally curious and wish to learn new things and revise and repeat what they have learned” (ibid., p. 19). Similarly, as in Swedish national ECEC curriculum, the children’s agency can be seen in connection to the term participation and in Finnish case joined with involvement. “Participation and involvement” are one of the six interconnected transversal competences, the key concept of Finnish curricular documents that highlights the lifelong learning and provides the continuum from early childhood education to pre-primary and primary education (ibid., p. 21). As in the Swedish document, it is connected to democratic values and sustainability and children’s rights to be heard and supported in active participation and engagement in matters of their own lives but also within the community they belong to (ibid., p. 24).

1.3 Strategic and curricular documents in the Czech Republic

As the Czech Republic is the member of the OECD and the EU, the national educational policy strategies shall follow the educational recommendations set by these institutions. Currently, there has been taken several steps to initiate transformation of the Czech educational arena. First step was made by issuing Strategy for the educational policy of the Czech Republic up to 2030+ (further only Strategy 2030+). It has been accepted by the Czech government in the October 2020 as the key document setting the objectives and investment priorities for Czech educational policy for the period of ten years 2020–2030, focusing particularly on regional education, non-formal education, and lifelong learning. Apart from the general objectives and measures, the document contains a structure of the implementation plan, key measures for the first 3 years (2020–2023), monitoring and evaluating procedures and risk management plan. As an annex, there is a complement document, the Guidelines for the Education Policy of the Czech Republic 2030+.

The Czech curricular documents, from 2007 are in effect on two levels, on the national level in case of ECEC as Framework Educational Programme for Preschool Education (FEP PE) that is transferred to the preschool level by each preschool creating obligatory School Educational Programme (SEP) for the whole preschool and optional Class Educational Programme by a teacher/s of each preschool class. Throughout the years, several adjustments have been made in FEP PE but mainly as extensions of the document than as innovation of the content. However, in line with newly set goals in Strategy 30+, the revision of the Framework Educational Programme for Preschool Education and improvement the quality of preschool education has been announced as one of the measures for the first implementation period of the Strategy 2030+. The work on the new Curriculum has been started but it has not been published yet. As these two national documents are crucial and binding for preschools to base their School Education Program (SEP) on them, I further describe briefly whether and how the theme children’s agency is present in these documents.

1.3.1 Agency in Strategy for the educational policy of the Czech Republic up to 2030+

The Strategy 2030+ sets two main goals. The first goal is vaguely connected to the theme agency of a student as it directs the educational goal to “active civic, professional and personal life” (MEYS, 2020, p. 5). Nevertheless, in the general description of this objective, there is no reference to agency or any similar keywords that would foresee the phenomena. Yet, there are couple of references to student taking responsibility for their studies. First, it is mentioned in a paragraph about formative assessment, where is stated that “...we will strengthen the use of formative assessment, which focuses on each pupil’s progress, supports the learning process, leads to pupils’ taking responsibility for their own results...” (ibid., p. 18), or further: “...we will strengthen formative assessment methods in schools, as these promote learning and encourage pupils to take responsibility...” (ibid., p. 19). Further, in the paragraph

about Civic Education is also referred to: "...we will develop students' ability to act as responsible citizens..." (ibid., p. 18). Also, one of general objective of the Civic Education is stated as it "...will guide pupils to mutual respect and tolerance, to critical thinking and to an active interest in public affairs and life around them..." (ibid., p. 18). Notably, it is only "active interest", not active participation as it could be anticipated bearing in mind the OECD strategic document.

Further in the paragraph Promote the development of civic competences (strategic line 1 – Transforming the content, methods, and assessment of education, fifth component), there are some characteristics that can be viewed in connection to children's agency: "... Personal development also includes the ability to choose an educational path and prepare for a career. This includes critical thinking and complex problem-solving skills, as well as skills in developing arguments, and constructive participation in local activities and decision-making at all levels..." (ibid., p. 33).

Further in the document, the closest to the studied theme is the description of participation and autonomy in schools and pupil's involvement in the sixth component of the strategic line 1, Safe environment in schools, development of participation and autonomy. From the evaluation of current situation at schools, the document recognises that students' involvement is rather formal, often realised only in a form of participation in students' parliament: "In their opinions, they [pupils] are less able to influence the selection of teaching methods and even less the content and objectives of their education, which is an essential condition for the development of their own educational autonomy" (ibid., p. 34).

Therefore, it is highlighted that the revisions of curriculum "will emphasise the development of social and civic competences that strengthen pupils' participation in school and community life... will create better conditions to set a mix of subjects giving pupils the opportunity to influence the direction of their education...schools will have sufficient methodical support to develop systems that promote pupil autonomy" (ibid., p. 34–35). The term responsibility is yet again mentioned, although not further elaborated: "...Pupils' responsibility for their actions will also be strengthened, in keeping with their age-appropriate intellectual and voluntary maturity" (ibid., p. 35).

Interestingly, there is an asset of non-formal education in enhancing pupils' responsibility and autonomy recognised but there is no connection to formal education in a way that methods or approaches of non-formal education shall be integrated to the formal education (ibid., p. 39).

Autonomy is not elaborated throughout the document, and the only other reference is in the paragraph Greater learning autonomy which is set in the connection with digital competences and yet again with the assessment: "...Teachers and pupils will be assisted by digital tools for the individual assessment of learning outcomes, as well as for self-assessment. We will support platforms that enable pupils to gain greater learning autonomy ..." (ibid., p. 32).

Regarding preschool education, there is a specific set of measures and key activities to support preschool education for the first implementation period (2020–2023). However, it is mainly aimed to improve the quality of preschools since more children shall be attending the preschools from early age (not only the compulsory last year before the mandatory school attendance). This is seen as a 'remedy' for the currently very common deferral of the start of school attendance (ibid., p. 81).

Reference to agency within the preschool arena can be seen only in the description of the revision of the content of curricular framework (FEP PE). There is mentioned among other preschool goals such as the promotion of key competences, motor development and fitness of children, also "...the promotion of...initiative, independence, problem-solving, creativity, teamwork..." (ibid., p. 81). Further, the promotion of autonomy and responsibility can be sensed yet again in connection to assessment: "It is advisable to promote children's self-assessment even in pre-school education" (ibid., p. 81).

1.3.2 Agency in Czech curriculum for preschool education (FEP PE)

Since the curricular revision from 2005–2007, the Framework Educational Programme for Preschool Education (FEP PE) has been built on the concept of development of key competences. This concept of key competences remains present in the revised curriculums as it is highlighted in the Strategy 2030+, and can be loosely seen in line with enhancing children’s agency. The key competences represent the educational outcomes and are generally described as “sets of anticipated knowledge, skills, capabilities, attitudes and values important for the personal development and realisation of each individual” (FEP PE, 2021, p. 10). The development of key competences is seen in a lifelong perspective, they represent sets of “action-oriented and practically applicable outputs” that develop gradually to more complex throughout the educational system and continue within the further course of life” (ibid., p. 10). The competences are as following: learning competences, problem-solving competences, communicative competences, social and personal competences, civil and operational competences. The enhancement of agency can be sensed from the perspective of preschool educators creating the opportunities for children to become agentic via gradually gaining the key competences. As it can be seen in the conception of the preschool education that “orients towards the child acquiring the basics of key competences from an early age and thus acquiring the prerequisites for his/her lifelong education, enabling him/her to more easily and reliably realise themselves in the knowledge society” (ibid., p. 6). Further, a more tangible implication towards children’s agency, one of the three overall targets of preschool education that shall guide the teachers in their everyday work is stated as “an acquisition of personal independence and the ability to express oneself as an independent personality having impact on one's surroundings” (ibid., p. 10). These targets are described as “universal, natural and omnipresent” and it is emphasized that the preschool teachers shall incorporate them not only to the teaching and planning activities, but also to their behaviour, approach, and attitudes towards children (ibid., p. 10).

As mentioned earlier, the term agency itself cannot be found in the document as it does not exist a Czech equivalent of it. However, similarly as Swedish and Finnish curricula, the term participation in a form of ‘active participation’ is present in the main features specific for preschool education in connection to the teaching approach: “The didactic style of educating children in kindergarten is based on the principle of educational offer, individual choice and active participation of the child. The teacher is the child's guide on his journey to knowledge, he/she awakens in the child an active interest and desire to look around, listen and discover, not the one who ‘tasks’ the child and checks the fulfilment of these tasks” (ibid., p. 8).

Also, ‘the didactic style of educational offer’ is highlighted within the description of satisfactory psychosocial conditions of preschool education as the appropriate pedagogical style that “counts with active co-participation of a child and with independent decision-making of the child” (ibid., p. 32). Further, it is described as “a method applied in preschool education based on the fact that the educational activities prepared by the teacher are offered to the children, and the children choose individually and freely a specific activity, level of difficulty or way of solving from this offer” (ibid., p. 48).

Additionally, within the expected outcomes of each key competence, it can be sensed several references towards terms often connected to agency. In overall, key competences are described in very child’s emancipating manners, what they can do/manage or influence, e. g. “he/she solves problems based on first-hand experience...spontaneously invents new solutions to problems and situations...express his/her thoughts independently...understands that he/she can make decisions about what he/she does freely, but that he/she is also responsible for his/her decisions...is able to respect others, negotiate, accept and make compromises... he/she can form his/her opinion independently and express it...can reject behaviour and communication that is unpleasant to him/her...is aware of his/her rights and the rights of others, learns to defend and respect them; understands that all people have equal value” (ibid., pp. 11–13).

2 Children's agency through the lenses of the sociology of childhood

The notion of children's agency since it emerged has played a crucial role in shaping the theories about children and childhood. As the sociology of childhood has accentuated the importance of studies on children as competent, agentic beings within the social context and since the 1970s started to critically scrutinize the traditional theories of socialization and child development, I selected it as the theoretical background to this study.

First, I describe the main principles of the sociology of childhood that were constituted in a call for a new paradigm as it redefined the view on childhood, children and hence children's agency. Second, I look at the challenges raised within the sociology of childhood in conceptualising the children's agency. And last, I list several typologies of children's agency that highlight the current directions in reconceptualizing children's agency.

2.1 Reconstructing childhood and call for a new paradigm

The sociology of childhood, also called the new sociology of childhood was among the first that put forward that even though children's agency was broadly highlighted in the twentieth century, the agency of children was often controlled and limited in many social contexts (James & James, 2004). As a result, the sociology of childhood has brought a debate about 'reconstructing' childhood and a call for a new paradigm (James & Prout, 2015).

Theoreticians within the sociology of childhood came with a view of childhood as a social construction, as an institution that "provides an interpretative frame for understanding the early years of human life" and cannot be seen without considering the class, gender and/or ethnicity (James & Prout, 2015, p. 3). Also, several scholars operate with the meanings of children and childhood as narratives, in the way that "narratives are social constructions that interpret an observed reality, such as childhood in the form of a story, in historically and culturally grounded ways (Baker, 2006; Fisher, 1987)" (In Baraldi, 2022, p. 8). In this way, they rejected the classic dichotomy between agency and structure and that children's agency develops to full adult agency and began to spread a child-centred approach. Moreover, socialization was not only seen as a process of adaptation and internalization but also as a process of "appropriation, reinvention, and reproduction...how children negotiate, share, and create culture with adults and each other (Corsaro, 1992; James, Jenks, & Prout, 1998)" (In Corsaro, 2015, p. 16).

Further, from the beginning of modernity, in Western world, the metanarrative of childhood has been refined as "...the combined result of the importance of children's self-realization and the need to exercise control on children (Prout 2000a)" (In Baraldi, 2022, p. 8). Subsequently, the significance of the metanarrative of children's self-realisation has enlarged since the 1950s. In reaction, the sociology of childhood remarked that children are competent human beings and able to participate in social relations and assign meanings to the social world. Thus, this competence was placed in the core of the concept of children's agency.

Moreover, the shift can also be seen in the importance of studying children's being, interactions and culture from their own position, not necessarily in connections to adults and their roles in constructing the childhood. Children are seen as active agents that play part in constructing their own lives and social relationships, and lives of others in their surrounding and in broader perspective the society they belong to. As Lee (1998) explains it, a child is seen as a 'complete human being' rather than 'incomplete

becoming' (In James & James, 2004). However, seeing the child ultimately as a competent being, it disregards the developmental aspects of human lives in general. Thus, Lee later (2001) takes even further the dichotomy of being and becoming and claimed that there are no complete beings, nor children, neither adults, and that we all are on the way to become (In Brembeck et al., 2004). Also, they recommend ethnography as one of the most suitable methodologies for conducting research studies focusing on children's life and their construction of childhood.

Consequently, central principles to the new paradigm can be summarised as follows (James & Prout, 2003, p. 8):

- 1) Childhood needs to be understood as a social construction,
- 2) childhood, as a variable of social analysis, is always interconnected to other variables such as class, gender, or ethnicity,
- 3) children actively construct their own social relationships and cultures and lives around them, they "construct and reconstruct" their childhood,
- 4) children's social relationships, childhood need to be studied from their stance as well, not only from the perspective of adults on their social construction,
- 5) ethnography plays a primer role among selection of methodologies as it grants a direct voice to children and active participation in the production of research data,
- 6) childhood in this view brings the theme of double hermeneutic of the social sciences.

2.2 First attempts to conceptualise children's agency

Since the beginning of the call for reconstructing childhood, there were continuous attempts to conceptualize children's agency. James & James (2009) explains that the concept of agency is among key concepts of the sociology of childhood for two reasons. First, it underlines the connection between the childhood studies and the theoretical debates related to relation of structure – agency within the social sciences. Second, it highlights the new perspectives of seeing children that consequently have impact on research and policy related to children and youth.

From the early standpoint that childhood is a social construction, the first definitions of children's agency attempt to go beyond the traditional socialisation theory and Piagetian child development in order to 'capacitate' children. In 1990, James and Prout defined children as social actors that "are and must be seen as active in the construction and determination of their own social lives, the lives of those around them and of the societies in which they live" (ibid., p. 8). In 1998, to encompass this view of children and childhood, James, Jenks and Prout came with the term 'childhood agency'. Mayall in 2002 adds to the emerging discussion around children's agency, the notion of recognising the difference between actor and agent: "A social actor does something, perhaps something arising from a subjective wish. The term agent suggests a further dimension: negotiation with others, with the effect that the interaction makes a difference – to a relationship or to a decision, to the workings of a set of social assumptions or constraints" (p. 21).

James (2009) in continuation with Mayall's stance elaborates children's agency in connection to the notion of seeing children as social actors. She describes children's agency as "ability to act creatively and to make things happen" (p. 42). Further, drawing on studies about children's experience of abusive families or parental divorce, she concludes that although the concepts of children's agency are often connected to a political agenda to reveal children's minority status or subordinate position in relation to adults, "agency, in the end, is an attribute of individual children; it is something which they may or may not choose to exercise, rather than a symbol of their minority social status" (ibid., 2009, p. 44).

However, in the following years, the central principles of the new paradigm and the initial conceptualization of children's agency started to be critically scrutinised within the sociology of childhood or other disciplines collectively named as childhood studies (the anthropology of childhood or children's geographies among others). In the next paragraph, I outline some of the challenges that

have been addressed within the sociology of childhood and further shaped the current calls for reconceptualising children's agency.

2.3 Challenges in conceptualising of children's agency

Tisdall & Punch (2012, p. 251) argues that the new paradigm created 'mantras' that permeated many childhood studies and publications, concretely the notion of social construction of childhood, the concentration on children's agency and the importance of children and young people's voices and participation. Also, the initial rejection of developmental psychology's assets by the proponents of the sociology of childhood has been reconsidered and more flexible approaches withdrawing the modernist dualism were introduced. Since the beginning of 21st century, critical voices have been raised within the sociology of childhood and other childhood studies to challenge these 'mantras'. Similarly, Baraldi (2020) in depicting the conceptual narrative of children's agency identifies three main problematic areas: the relation between children's participation and agency, the connection of agency with the epistemology of the social constructionism, and the discrepancy between the Western narrative childhood and agency, and the narrative of childhood and agency affected by the marginalisation and inequality (pp. 11–16).

In the following paragraphs, I look at the identified theoretical challenges that has impacted the attempts to re-conceptualize the children's agency: (1) the embeddedness of agency in social constructionism, (2) the distancing from the developmental psychology, (3) the problematic relation between participation and agency, (4) the theme of the universal/global child and childhood, and the view of agency as ultimately positive and desirable privilege of a child.

2.3.1 Embeddedness of agency in social constructionism

First, the anchoring of agency in social constructionism has been examined and revealed to be rather problematic. Prout (2005, 2011) critically scrutinised the dichotomy between the social/cultural and the natural stemmed from the social constructionism. Prout (2005) explains, "what seems to be required are ways of speaking about childhood that can handle the hybridity of childhood, that can tolerate its ambiguity without lapsing very quickly into the 'purification' that dichotomies demand" (p. 64). Oswell (2013) elaborates further that "Those beings which we perceive as children are perceived and understood as separate entities with definable attributes and qualities only by virtue of their being socially constructed" (p. 10). In this way, the concept of children's agency as an individual trait (seeing independency and autonomy as solely child's characteristics) was dismissed in favour of defining children's agency as being rooted in social relations. Further, a demand was identified that the view of children seen as being agentic, having the capability to shape the social worlds needs to be enlarged by reshaping "...our understanding of social structure as more open to the dynamic interactions and influences of children as agentic beings" (Oswell, 2013, p. 37).

Although the sociology of childhood initially critically scrutinised Giddens' structuration theory and the structural constraints of children's agency, it was soon acknowledged that children's agency is restrained by structural constraints, and by relational constraints stemming from a generational order. Leonard (2019) defines the generational order as "an analytical framework to illuminate how children and adults are located within existing generational categories that produce and reproduce reciprocal generational relationships" (p. 407). Further, to bridge structure and agency, Leonard (2016) introduced a concept of generagency to imply the interplay between agency and generation. She aimed "to merge the structural location of childhood and the generational positions it produces with children's (and adults') ongoing capacities for practising and realising agency within and across these generational categories" (2019, p. 413). The concept of generagency further consists of intergeneracy and intrageneracy, with intergeneracy as enabling "reflection on child–adult relationships through the lens of generation" and intrageneracy as a view "...inside these generational locations to illuminate the power relationships that exist within both settings" (ibid., p. 413). Consequently, relational constraints also bring forward the dichotomy of children's autonomy and their dependence.

2.3.2 Distancing from developmental psychology

Several sociologists of childhood (Prout, 2005, 2011; Lee, 2001) also reconsidered the initial dismissal of developmental psychology's assets in defying the childhood, and consequently, children's agency. Woodhead (2009) argues that developmental psychology has its important role in characterising childhood "...as childhood is by definition transitional as well as culturally constructed...with major changes in physical size, maturity, relationships, identities, skills, activities and perspectives" (In Tisdall & Punch, p. 253). Moreover, the contribution to developmental psychology by L. Vygotsky and other proponents of cultural-historical activity theory has been broadly recognised for the accents on social interactions within the development without seeing one predictable pathway to adulthood as Piaget.

2.3.3 Problematic relation between participation and agency

Throughout the years, there has been an emerging debate regarding the relation between participation and agency. As mentioned in the Background section, the UNCRC has brought the theme of 'children's participation' to the focus of theorists of the sociology of childhood. Baraldi (2022) recognises the participation as a 'controversial concept' as different studies prove that it is not a unified concept within the sociology of childhood. He summarizes that for some scholars the concept of participation is vaguely, or not at all, connected to agency, for several it reflects mainly in decision-making of children in their social environment. Further, for some theorists it takes either a form of "...consultative, collaborative, and child-led participation", or "...as attendance, involvement, and influence" or thirdly, "as the acceptance of asymmetrical power, challenges to power relations, and requests for more support" (ibid., p. 11).

Furthermore, closely related to the participation and/or children's participation rights, critique has arisen around the universal construction of child and their agency. The Minority World's narrative of childhood and children's agency was scrutinised on the background of the narrative of childhood and agency viewed from the Majority World's perspective. Many studies conducted in the Majority World concentrating on children's participation rights and agency in life conditions influenced by poverty, violence, forced marriage, genital mutilation, child labour, child recruitment in armed groups, or forced migration shatter the whole Western concept of children's agency (Abebe, 2013; Campbell et al., 2015; Klocker, 2007; Mohammed, 2019; Muftee, 2015; Robson et al. 2007). Additionally, the universal construct of the 'global child' excluded even children living in the Minority World whose life conditions are characterised by poverty, violence, social marginalization, or inequality. Also, the UNCRC and other international institutions' rhetoric in the 'best interests' of children, and intervention based on that have been denounced as promoting universal 'global childhood' view that is far away from the reality (Baraldi, 2020; Benty, 2005; Collins et al., 2020; Wyness, 2013b).

2.3.4 Agency as ultimately positive and desirable privilege of a child

Last constraint relates to overfocusing on agency as children's privilege, something "taken-for-granted, unproblematized or assumed inherently to be positive and desired by all children and young people" (Tisdall and Punch, 2012, p. 256). Abebe (2019) identifies several assumptions about agency that need to be questioned. The first one is connected to the role and capacity of a child in a society, "to view agency as the exercise of free will against the constraints of social structures" (p. 5). As a second assumption he outlines the view that "all children can and will act in their best interest and make decisions if given the opportunity" (ibid., 2019, p. 5). Similarly, some theorists (Gigengack, 2008; Hoggett 2001) examine the paradox of agency where they point out the contradiction of the agency and the perils of romanticizing agency as innately good or constructive. Hoggett (2001) explains, "the desire to give emphasis to the active, resilient, resourceful aspects of the welfare subject is an understandable reaction to the pathologizing and problematizing of the passive and 'dependent' welfare subject... However, there is a danger that we slip into equating agency with constructive coping as if the two were synonymous...as if agency is good and absence of agency is bad" (pp. 42–43). They draw example on street children that in practices such as violence, drug usage or theft they are being agentic, but this is not viewed as positive and does not bring them 'good'. Third assumption identified by Abebe (2019) is in "the belief that children 'gain' agency as they mature and acquire knowledge, critical thinking, and

skills...through their increasing independence from their parents” (p. 6). This third presumption represents the notion that children’s agency expands with their development, thus agency can be quantified and, in this way, also normatively assessed, as desirable vs. undesirable, having right or not right amount of it etc. Contrary, he claims as agency is highly contextual, it can only be ‘measured’ qualitatively. The elaboration of those three assumptions leads Abebe to changing the perspective of the question about children’s agency. The question is not whether a child have or do not have agency but what kind of agency they have, how they exercise it, what role in shaping it plays context and relations with others.

2.4 Attempts to reconceptualise children’s agency

The challenges in conceptualising children’s agency outlined above led to calls for reconceptualising it. The first ‘re-concepts’ started to emerge on the background of studies conducted in the Global South/Majority World (Abebe, 2013; Andersen, 2012; Campbell et al., 2015; Klocker, 2007; Mohammed, 2019; Muftee, 2015). Those research studies draw evidence that not all children have the social capacity ‘to act independently’. Consequently, there have been attempts to provide typologies of children’s agency, especially from the contextual perspective, how different contexts forms children’s agency and how children shape these contexts. Also, these typologies question the typical rights-based discourses of children’s agency and the predominant link of children’s agency to a free will and liberalist autonomy. In the following paragraphs, I list a few typologies of children’s agency that attempt to encompass some conceptual challenges of children’s agency, and end with a brief summary of these alternative views calling for reconceptualising agency.

2.4.1 Thin and thick agency

Deriving from the socio-economic and cultural context, Klocker (2007) introduces the concept of thick and thin agency based on studying agency of rural Tanzanian girls as child domestic workers. Klocker’s concept of agency includes the fact that children’s agency is not always expressed in emancipated manners, bringing ‘good’ to the child and that structural constraints, concretely in this case poverty, age and lack of educational opportunities affects how and what kind of agency children put in action. She describes, “...‘thin’ agency refers to decisions and everyday actions that are carried out within highly restrictive contexts, characterized by few viable alternatives; ‘thick’ agency is having the latitude to act within a broad range of options... Structures, contexts, and relationships can act as ‘thinners’ or ‘thickeners’ of individual’s agency, by constraining or expanding their range of viable choices (Klocker, 2007, p. 85)” (In Mohammed, 2019, p. 962).

2.4.2 The ambiguity of agency and everyday agency

The ambiguity of agency that appeared from studies from the Majority World moved several theorists to explore the question of what kind of agency is seen as ‘appropriate’ for children and youth instead of the common inquiry about if and how the children’s agency is acknowledged. Payne (2012) based on ethnographic studies in child-headed households in rural and urban Zambia reports that children and youth living in such child-headed households are often seen as socially problematic because their agency stems from being a household head, breadwinner or caregiver is ambiguous or ‘out of place’. Such context, life situation of children is often viewed as a situation of a crisis, and daily struggle that forces children to acquire personal agency connected with coping and survival strategies. However, Payne (2012), in this context, elaborates a concept of ‘everyday agency’ that goes beyond defying children’s agency in such life conditions as only manifestation of competency, resilience and coping strategies. She calls for studying and bringing the perspective of children and youth, how they perceive it. By calling the agency ‘everyday’, she attempts to bring the life ordinariness aspect. The everyday agency then refers to “the expressions of agency perceived by children and young people to be part of their everyday life, even though these actions frequently go against the grain of what is considered socially and culturally appropriate” (Payne, 2012, p. 400). She continues that by “...acknowledging ‘everyday agency’ means being guided by children and young people and demands that we are completely open to their interpretations of their existence.” (ibid., p. 405). She claims that seeing this aspect of children’s

agency is particularly important when planning the social intervention. Children and youth in such life conditions shall not be seen only as vulnerable and at risk or as threats to the moral and social order of society but more importantly as significant holders of knowledge of the situation worth been listen to and seen as “...more than just competent actors in accordance with their considerable and important (adult) roles and responsibilities” (ibid., p. 407), rather as “...legitimate actors in household and community spaces” (ibid., p. 408).

2.4.3 Children’s agency as a continuum and interdependence

This typology by Abebe departs from the concept of children’s agency by Robson et al. (2007) that is based on collection of studies conducted in the Majority World. Robson et al. states that the contexts and relationships in which children’s lives are situated need to be recognised in order to understand the complexity of agency. Drawing on examples of the agency of young girls’ agentic action in the situation of exchange marriage or ‘tactical agency’ of child soldiers (Honwana, 2005) and ‘agency of victims’ of child beggars (Utas, 2005), Abebe (2019) claims that agency can be defined “not only as a spectrum but also as being simultaneously located at both ends of a continuum” (p. 9). Accordingly, he defines agency as “...not only partial and contextual but also in flux...agency is negotiated continuously between children and families and communities as they navigate tensions between personal and collective interests...their everyday lives move back and forth along a continuum of diverse experiences and changing degrees of independence-dependence, reflecting authority, rights, abilities, knowledge, responsibilities, and so on” (ibid., p. 9).

Abebe’s second defying term, the interdependence is seen similarly as continuous process of children being dependent and independent when looking from different perspectives of their social and economic lives. Thus, there is not only one-sided dependence that shapes the children’s agency, as “...different forms of inter and intra-generational relationships moderate children’s lives, children’s needs are interdependent with those of their siblings, parents, and other members of their social networks” (ibid., p. 9). He draws an example of manifestation of agentic interdependence on working children in African communities as they are valued that they contribute financially to the family livelihood but depend on the family resources in situations when they do not generate any income. As he concludes, “...working children’s agency is not an antithesis to the idea of their dependency...nor should their ability to earn money at a young age be confused with possession of ‘autonomy’ or ‘self-determinacy’... Child-adult relationships should be explained in terms of interdependencies, which are negotiated and renegotiated in relation to the particular social and cultural context” (ibid., p. 11). Also, he highlights that it is not only the context that influence the agency but also the dynamics of the interdependent relations and their involvements and changes in time. In such perspective, the agency is “a strategy of collective existence through which social reproduction is sustained” (ibid., p. 11).

In this way, all three typologies offer an alternative viewpoint for conceptualising children’s agency while bringing the socio-economic and cultural context of children’s life, the perspective of life course – the continuum of changes and involvement and the relational aspect by including the interdependency of relations the child encounters throughout the life. Therefore, agency does not need to be seen only as a manifestation of autonomy, competence or resilience and coping strategies, as something that a child has or lack of, but as diverse life strategies that stems from children’s social, economic and cultural background and dynamics of their life and relations. In line with this, Robson et al. (2007) provides, in attempt to capture it in the whole complexity, a definition of agency as “an individual’s own capacities, competencies and activities through which they navigate the contexts and positions of their life-worlds fulfilling many economic, social and cultural expectations, while simultaneously charting individual/collective choices and possibilities for their daily and future lives” (p. 135).

In the following third section, I further examine the concepts of agency in current international and Czech research narrowed to early childhood education. I briefly also mention the state of research on forest preschools in connection to children’s agency and in the Czech Republic particularly. In a following fourth section, I summarise the theoretical groundwork (section 2) with outcomes of literature

review (section 3) in an outline of conceptual foundations that specifically informs my study and reflects in the data analysis.

3 Literature review – children’s agency in ECEC

The search of literature database showed that the research on notion of children’s agency has bloomed gradually in last 10–15 years. Some research studies refer to the term ‘children’s agency’ explicitly (Ayton, 2012; Bolin, 2016; Caiman & Lundegård, 2014; Gavora, 2016, 2022; Houen, Danby, Farrell & Thorpe, 2016; Markström & Halldén, 2009; Tertoolen, Geldens, van Oers, & Popeijus, 2017), some use the term ‘sense of agency’ (Hilppö, Lipponen, Kumpulainen, & Virlander 2016; Rainio, 2010; Sairanen, & Kumpulainen, 2014; Sarainen, Kumpulainen and Kajamaa, 2022); whereas several other scholars apply different terms that tends to focus what is seen as aspects of agency such as active participation, agentic voices of children, children’s autonomy or empowerment of children (Binder, 2014; Collins, 2013; Lemon, 2013; Shier, 2001). Nevertheless, there is not a vast pool of research studies on children’s agency in ECEC and the noticeable ascent in present years indicates that it is yet to be explored. This is further evidenced by Varpanen’s review of conceptualizations of children’s agency in early education research that reviewed literature from 1998 and appointed only 35 empirical studies (2019, p. 3).

In general, the theme of children’s agency is dealt most frequently from the perspective of teachers, and how a teacher’s role as an ‘educational expert’ is related to children’s agency within the preschool environment (Ayton, 2012; Binder, 2015; Ellegaard, 2004; Garvis, Ødegaard, & Lemon, 2015; Garvis, & Pramling (Ed.), 2017; Hilppö, Lipponen, Kumpulainen, & Virlander, 2016; Houen, Danby, Farrell & Thorpe, 2016; Lemon, 2013; Mackey, & Vocht-van Alphen, 2016; Määttä and Järvelä, 2013; Månsson, 2008; Robson, 2010; Sairanen, & Kumpulainen, 2014; Tertoolen, Geldens, van Oers, & Popeijus, 2017). Within the literature focused more on teachers’ role in connection to children’s agency, I differentiate two complementing tendencies that appeared. First, studies that focus a bit more on teachers’ role in creating conditions for expression of children’s agency and in this way, let the children’s agency occur. Second, studies where teachers’ role is seen more in direction of enabling and supporting the agentic behaviour and active participation via more ‘free’, less planned teaching. The studies concentrating on creating conditions emphasize listening to children, their narratives and creating space for children’s voices to be expressed, heard and even acted upon (Binder, 2015; Garvis, Ødegaard, & Lemon, 2015; Garvis, & Pramling (Ed.), 2017; Lemon, 2013; Sairanen, & Kumpulainen, 2014). The studies that tend to concentrate more on the leading role of a teacher in creating educational situations to develop children’s agency emphasize language of the teacher, and the potential for dialogue and interaction between a child and a teacher to support the child’s agency (Houen, Danby, Farrell & Thorpe, 2016; Mackey, & Vocht-van Alphen, 2016; Tertoolen, Geldens, van Oers, & Popeijus, 2017). Contrastingly, the studies that concentrate on teachers’ role in enhancing children’s agency and participation focus on evaluating and enhancing the competency of a child (Ayton, 2012; Ellegaard, 2004; Månsson, 2008).

Across Nordic countries the literature search showed that authors often relate children’s agency to the term “the competent child” by the beginning of twenty-first century (Brembeck, Johansson & Kampmann, 2004; Ellegaard, 2004; Hellman, Heikkilä, & Sundhall, 2014; Månsson, 2008). As mentioned above, Swedish official curriculum for the preschool (1998, revised in 2018) operates with the notion of agency under the themes of children’s participation and influence on the content and daily activities in preschools (Curriculum for the Pre-school, Lpfö 18, p. 11). Consequently, several Swedish scholars devote their studies to ‘children’s participation’ and/or ‘children’s influence’ (Borg & Pramling Samuelsson, 2022; Hamerslag, 2013; Pramling Samuelsson & Sheridan, 2003; Sandberg & Eriksson, 2010), often from the socio-cultural theoretical perspective. Also, the studies have in common that the agency is seen as something to be enacted in children. As an example, Borg & Pramling Samuelsson (2022) connect agency to children’s active participation and decision-making and see those as “aspects that cannot be presumed to always develop naturally... they depend on mediation in which teachers play

important roles...it is not enough just to acknowledge children's agency...there is a need to explore how children's agency can be enacted" (p. 157).

Nevertheless, a Swedish study by Markström & Halldén (2009) uses the theoretical background of the sociology of childhood and most explicitly investigate children's agency from the children's positions. The authors are interested in "individual children's lived experiences" in preschool settings (Markström & Halldén, p. 113). By choosing the children's perspective, they aim to explore preschool as a children's place, however, they still acknowledge that it is highly institutionalised. Thus, the aim of the study is set as to "acknowledging children's agency and to take actor's perspective" (ibid., p. 113). They depart from seeing preschool through the lenses of social constructivism where the preschool is a socially structured institution via social practices of the actors, teachers and children. Moreover, they look at the children as active agents and with anchoring it in the sociology of childhood they look at childhood as being a structural space, an institution that children "through their experiences and everyday activities are creating their childhood" (ibid., p. 113). Having these theoretical standpoints, the authors focus their investigation on strategies children use to construct, defend, negotiate and influence the social practices and how children's agentic actions relate to social order of a preschool seeing it as an institution with routines and rules. The authors are aware of differences of children and their characteristics such as individual dispositions, age, gender, ethnicity and social class, etc. but they tend to capture children's agency, their strategies in general focusing on "showing when and how the strategies become empowering" (ibid., p. 115). The findings listed as agentic strategies are as follows – "the strategy of silence and avoidance; the strategy of negotiating; the strategy of bringing issues into questions – children collaborating and rescuing other children; children collaborate to defend their space, accepting in part the social order" (ibid., pp. 116–119). The authors conclude that these strategies and using different resources support children in resisting the social order in the preschool allowing them to gain power and control over certain situations and thus being active in influencing their everyday lives. Although the authors claim that their intention is an attempt "to understand how children could appropriate power" (ibid., p. 115), they do not elaborate on the limitations that comes from studying the children's agency from their perspective only, moreover from the perspective of an adult that naturally possess more power. Yet, it would be interesting to have the voices of children heard and investigated, how they see their own agency, applying those strategies and negotiating and constructing the situations. I consider the study and authors' suggestions for further investigation of the theme, concretely "what space is given to children, and, on the other hand, how children assume power and make conquests" (ibid., p. 121) as very relevant nowadays although the study is from 2009.

Similarly, Wood (2014) in her study focusing on questioning the concept of free choice and free play in early childhood education in England also identified several strategies children use to exercise their agency. Wood raises an important theme that free choice and free play although recognised as essential in children's development is rather difficult to realize in educational settings with all the structure, rules, adults' positions, their values and beliefs and educational planning based on curriculum. She continues that naturally it affects the opportunities for children's agency, as the free choice and free play is restricted and 'controlled' by the institutional structures and power relations within, so it is the children's agency. Consequently, the forms of agency children manifest in 'free choice and free play' within the educational settings are not exactly "free" and certainly different than those forms of agency realised by children outside of educational settings and without any adults' supervision. Departing from post-structural perspective, she is interested in conceptualising children's agency in the context of institutional structures and power relations. Further, combining it with sociocultural standpoint, she approaches the children's agency as it "involves their [children's] motivation to learn, to become more competent and knowledgeable and to manage the social dynamics of institutional and interpersonal power" (Wood, 2014, p. 7). Sadly, as a method, she employed observation and discussion with teachers, not with children. Similar to Markström & Halldén's findings, she identifies strategies such as negotiation, conflict, resistance and subversion being applied by children when navigating their choices within the power structures and relations. Apart of findings, I found the study valuable in critically approaching the concept of free play. Also, the author elaborates 'pretence' as a children's tool for exercising their imaginary power and consequently she sees it as a form of agency. Wood explains it as follows, "they transformed people and objects in ways that present different possibilities for control or

resistance in ways that enabled them to exercise and affirm their agency...there can be five children in the role play area because one of them is the naughty dog and does not 'count' as a child" (ibid., p. 14). As mentioned, neither Markström & Halldén nor Wood investigate the children's voices, how they perceive their own agency by applying interviews with children or focus groups. Contrastingly, Sheridan & Pramling Samuelsson (2001) employed solely semi-structured interviews with 5-year-old children while studying Swedish preschools. Albeit the authors used the findings from the interviews to relate the levels of participation and influence experienced by children to levels of the pedagogical quality of preschools, it brought some interesting findings about children's conceptions. By children experiencing influence, the authors mean "their experience of exercising influence over their situation, their learning processes, the physical environment, what they are expected to learn about and activities in preschool" (Sheridan & Pramling Samuelsson, 2001, p. 169). However, when questioning children they use a concept of 'deciding' as children are more familiar with that word than with 'influence'. (The word 'participation' is not even mentioned regards to questions in interview.) Although I can relate from personal experience that in daily practice of Swedish preschools the process of decision-making is more emphasized and therefore 'familiar' than the concept of influence, it lacks the deeper or more thorough elaboration of reasons for using the term 'deciding'. However, I overlook these incongruities and look solely on the process of inquiring children's perspective and gaining the findings. I see the asset of this study in showing how beneficial findings can be obtained by asking children's perspective. As I above attempted to classify some studies on children's agency from the teacher's perspective and one of the common categories appeared to be enabling/allowing the children's agency to happen, I draw an excerpt of the interview that I see capture greatly and amusingly the insights adults can receive from interviewing children (C – a child, I – an interviewer):

- "I. Have you ever decided?
 C. The teacher doesn't let me.
 I. Aren't you allowed to decide?
 C. No.
 I. What are you not allowed to decide?
 C. Eh, what I would like to do, I can't decide that, only when the teachers say that I can."

(Sheridan & Pramling Samuelsson, 2001, p. 184)

Similarly to Markström & Halldén (2009), Caiman & Lundegård (2014) also addressed preschool children's agency together with looking at it from children's perspective, although in this case the data was video recorded. The study stands out as authors are interested in the process of doing the agency applying Dewey's pragmatism, how children's agency is formed when children encounter with situations related to science or sustainability. In line with Dewey's perspective, the authors see children's agency „as something that children achieve together in transactions rather than something they possess" (Caiman & Lundegård, 2014, p. 437) "...or is located in the environment" (ibid., p. 442). Consequently, they see it more as an "engagement with particular temporal-relational-contexts- for action" than as a sort of power (ibid., p. 441). They approach agency through Dewey's notion of 'experience' elaborating on his 'principle of continuity' encompassing three steps – an anticipation, a course of action and fulfilment. Moreover, the data were collected during outdoor periods of 'free play' when the teachers were not leading the activities. Drawing two examples, protecting a pea plant from heavy rain and bird nest from nearby construction noise, the authors portray how children can achieve agency on their own going through those three steps – anticipation, course of action and fulfilment. The authors conclude that both examples demonstrate how teachers' listening approach and attentiveness to children's anticipations and course of actions bring the constitution of children's agency to the scene. They also emphasize the "vital force in having an experience" referring to Dewey's legacy. From my point of view, the study is indeed displaying manifestation of children's agency, but rather one of many dimensions of 'doing' the agency but that it is not distinctly discussed in the study. However, it clearly indicates how given space and time for experience to children could be enriching and leads to exercising of children's agency naturally. Also, it highlights the opportunities outdoor settings offer for exercising

agency without any prior and planned learning project by teachers as both examples – the problems that needed to be solved originated from children.

Although anchoring in another theoretical background, concretely in socio-cultural tradition and activity theory, the similar viewpoint on agency as something that is developed through interactions is noticeable in several Finnish studies. They commonly operate and explore a notion of ‘sense of agency’ and children’s perspectives on their own agency ((Hilppö, Lipponen, Kumpulainen, & Virlander 2016; Määttä & Järvelä, 2013; Rainio, 2010; Rainio, & Hilppö, 2017; Sairanen & Kumpulainen, 2014; Sarainen, Kumpulainen, & Kajamaa, 2022). Based on their empirical data, they identify a need for space for children to reflect on their agentic actions and voices in order to develop understanding of their ‘sense of agency’. Neither Dewey’s, nor Vygotsky’s approach is my initial choice of theoretical background of the study, but they certainly bring interesting viewpoints on constitution of agency. Furthermore, Rainio in her doctoral study (2010) and later work with a colleague (Rainio & Hilppö, 2017) elaborates not only the development of the sense of agency but more relevantly for my study, the contradictory elements of it. She identifies 5 contradictory yet connected components of children’s agency or as later categorised as ‘dialectics of agency’ that need to be taken into account especially in educational environments. Originally, in 2010, Rainio focused on development of agency in play pedagogy in a case study of a specific age-integrated classroom (children 4 years of age up to 8)¹ led by a teacher team and further educational specialists. While analysing the data, she recognised following contradictions:

“...we constantly widen our possibilities through imagination and fiction, i.e., through play and art...agency cannot be reduced only to visible, active and productive action in the material world...”

“...agency as simultaneously something continuous and enduring as well as situational and contingent...”

“...contradictory dynamics and struggle for balance between dependence and separability...”

“...the simultaneous need for mastery of and submission to social discourses and practices...”

“...the conditional and imbalanced nature of the adult-child relation – between control and agency”.

(Rainio, 2010, pp. 15–17).

As the author seems the contradictory dimensions of agency central, Rainio & Hilppö (2017) later tried to conceptualise the agency in multidisciplinary manners deriving from sociocultural and activity theory, critical psychology, sociology of childhood, feminist research and naturalistic social theory using as the framework the dialectics (p. 79). They determine the following 5 contradicting dimensions or dialectics of agency:

“...as enacted and imagined;

as situatively emergent and progressively developmental;

as dependence and separation;

as mastery and submission;

as control and freedom”

(Rainio & Hilppö, 2017, p. 78).

The authors see the contradictions manifesting as tensions and challenges and further analyse those 5 contradictions in order to testify the dialectical potential they have. The first, stating agency as enacted and imagined, based on their data analysis, they describe that the initial viewed opposition of “...understanding agency through active and productive action” on one side and “...as withdrawal from action or as mere ‘daydreaming’ ” (ibid., p. 89) on the other side cannot be seen contradictory. The data showed that those aspects constitute one another – children withdrew from the action, but at the same time started to imagine their own way so the agency in the imagination was present and further, this imaged way led them to enact more agency in the form of action. There, the resemblance can be seen with the Wood’s study and her recognition of the ‘pretence’ practice as exercising the imaginative power thus agency. The second dialectics, agency as situatively emergent and progressively developmental, the authors claim that could be more difficult to notice as it requires a longer time period to see the

¹ This class a result of a longitudinal pilot study with the aim of developing early education activities for the children’s transition from preschool to school using the a model of narrative learning and play pedagogy introduced by Hakkarainen (Rainio, 2010, p. 35).

developmental aspect. The third one, agency's dialectical aspect of dependence and separation is seen by the authors as "a dance between belonging and independence" (ibid., p. 91) that is in general humans' life struggle for agency on these two poles. Especially the separation, e. g. when children want to do something on their own terms or withdraw from the activity, authors illuminate that to see it just as the other side of belonging brings a situation of ambivalence but that can be seen as unconventional potential for agency to occur. As they explain: "...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" (ibid., p. 91) and suggest that to embrace and support these expressions of ambivalence by educators can lead them to adjust the norms for participation and thus make space for the children's agency. Another contradiction, between mastery and submission, they study it from the cultural psychological and post-structural point of view and identify the dialectics in that "...mastery flows reversibly from yielding oneself to the affordances of the [cultural] tools" (ibid., p. 91) and that constitute the agency. The last contradiction, between freedom and control, can be seen dialectical according to the authors, only "in its 'strictest' sense" (ibid., p. 91) because in the conducted study, they could see that the teachers encompass the contradiction in moments, but they recognise that it kept appearing in new forms for them to be dealt with differently. Rainio & Hilppö conclude that seeing the concept of agency through the dialectical lenses may help educators to deal with their frustrations that can stem from seeing these contradictions separately. Contrary, to see them as dialectics and thus potentials, it may enhance teacher's motivation to develop their practice and consequently creating more space for manifestation of children's agency. Although the study is focused yet again on teachers' role in enhancing the children's agency, I acknowledge greatly the attempt to capture the children's agency in its multifaceted nature including those aspects that could be seen antagonistic at the first glance.

In Czech research arena, the research within ECEC is in general scarce (Průcha, 2016). Nevertheless, two studies related to the theme and early childhood can be found by Gavora (2016, 2022), studying how preschool-aged children exert agency while acquiring literacy, specifically studying the children's agency in shared book reading situations in Czech families. In his first study (2016), he anchors it in the theoretical perspective of developmental psychology and work of Bandura but includes the tenets of the sociology of childhood. Interestingly, he looked at the concept of agency not only as a researched phenomena, but also as "a tool for sensitizing the analysis" (ibid., p. 104). The research question is set broadly as "How does the agentic behavior of children manifest in home reading situations?" (ibid., p. 104) and as a research method, the author selects in-depth interviews with parents. Unfortunately, there is no perspective of children included. Based on that, he identifies 6 main agentic strategies regarding home literacy practice: "(1) book selection, (2) monitoring reading, (3) commenting, (4) questioning, (5) expanding, and (6) reading-time negotiation" (ibid., p. 113).

In his second study from 2022, Gavora explores further parents' literacy practices connected to the children's agency, concretely how parents may "promote a sense of agency in children by providing opportunities for them to make choices and decisions and by delegating to them powers to influence events" (2022, p. 2128). Besides that, he widens it with studying family literacy characteristics (number of children's books in the household and parents' reasons for reading to children). As a third focus of the study as the author presupposes that children's agency may develop in relation to other literacy variables, he examines child's understanding of print and print concepts, concretely how children's agentic behaviour is connected to the knowledge of print (p. 2129, 2133). Similarly, as above-mentioned studies from educational environment, the agency is predominantly viewed from the position of adult and how he/she can enhance the agency of children. Moreover, it is also going in line with the observed trend in Swedish studies – connecting agency predominantly with 'decision-making' and 'influence'. Gavora notes to ground the study in the sociology of childhood, referring to the concept of being, belonging and becoming, and developing a sense of identity (referring to prominent sociologist of childhood) and sees it "in terms of pursuing children's intentional choices, initiatives, active participation and senses of autonomy..." (ibid., p. 2129). Furthermore, he follows Moran-Ellis' elaboration of children's agency as manifestation of social competence. Moran-Ellis emphasizes that agency is "an accomplishment through interaction, not a property possessed by the individual" (Moran-Ellis, 2013, p. 312) and using the term 'agentic capacity' she sees it as "a product of the interplay between individual desires and the exercise of power and authority by other actors, or institutional

actors” (Moran-Ellis, 2013, p. 311). The research design of Gavora’s study is quantitative, the author attempted to include collection of data also from children (not only adults – parents), however, the method administrated with children is in a form of a test (Concept about Print test for children developed in 2013 by Clay to assess children’s knowledge of print and print conventions). The findings presented are that in general, preschool children are viewed by their parents as active partners in shared reading practice. Interestingly, children’s agency turned on average above the midpoint of the scale applied, but the author recognises that the ratings among children individually differ greatly. The author assumes that it is not only the agentic ability of children that plays role but also “the agentic potential of the situation” (Gavora, 2020, p. 2140) so that children in the study applied as much agency as the interaction within the shared reading with parents allowed. Based on that Gavora concludes that the findings also disclose the different level of support among parents towards children’s agency. This reflects also in author’s conclusions regarding the CAP test conducted with children. The findings indicate anticipated positive correlation with the number of books in the children’s home but also it was significantly connected to parents’ literacy practices and family literacy characteristics. Similarly to his first study on this theme, Gavora consider essential to distinguish certain components of agency as he explains “identification of agency components offers a nuanced account of what children do when interacting with parents over book contents” (ibid., p. 2141). He identifies several agentic elements but summarise them into four – child’s volition, questioning, literary production, and monitoring parents’ reading (ibid., p. 2141). Even though I found the study and results many-sided and thought-provoking, I see limitations rather pervasive that the children’s agency is based on parents’ ratings and the data from children are not related to their perspectives on their agency. However, the author admits openly these limitations and express the necessity of direct observation of children, yet he does not suggest the direct interviews with children or any participatory research with children. Nevertheless, I found the study noteworthy from several points. First, the author calls for further research on this theme in mix method manners, to include qualitative design to be able to gain data also about quality of children’s agentic actions or quality of parents’ literacy practices with children. He also believes that the mix method approach can provide “stronger predictive models of children’s agency” (ibid., p. 2141). The author does not elaborate what he specifically means by ‘the quality of children’s agentic actions’ and ‘stronger predictive models’ but simply the acknowledgement of assets of qualitative approach is present and thus bringing a hope in studying the agency in more complex manners. Secondly, as all children in the study attended preschools, Gavora recommends further research monitoring also what role preschool activities and environment play in promoting children’s agency. I support the author’s suggestion for complementing the study with the extension from home to preschool environment, as it can bring richness to the data and more complex picture on how children live and navigate their agency. Targeting the study to agency’s promotion is debatable from my point view but it could bring the potential of showing what kind of promotion it needs or if it needs any at all. Lastly, I see an important asset of the study in bringing the theme of children’s agency in Czech research realm. Furthermore, the author also proposes two practical implications concretely for the Czech society. He suggests firstly to raise awareness focussed on supporting children’s agency in general, so parents particularly are informed, so they become capable of recognising agency of their children and support it. Secondly, regarding shared book reading, the author suggests creating programmes and materials for parents, so they get practical tips how to support development of their children’s literacy skills, not only programmes focusing solely on positive attitudes towards books and reading that exists presently. Yet again, he emphasizes that these materials shall also contain the information of children’s agency and activities to nourish it within the shared reading. It is yet in the direction of the adult promoting the child’s agency but as the author explains it is more in the form of adults’ openness and attentiveness, “parents should adopt a sensitive and responsive style during book reading that supports the agentic behaviour of their children” (ibid., p. 2142). I found his practical suggestions audacious and remarkable bearing in mind that the theme of children’s agency is not even yet an established and elaborated concept in the Czech research arena.

Regarding research on or within forest preschools in the Czech Republic is very rare. However, the interest by Czech students of pre-primary education is definitely perceptible as the majority of the studies on forest preschools can be found within the Bachelor’s and/or Master’s thesis. Nevertheless, these documents are mostly in descriptive manners, e.g. description of forest preschool operation or

historical evolution of such preschools, or how the pedagogical work is realised there, or in comparative manners highlighting the differences between forest preschools and prevalent state preschools. Similarly, a few studies were conducted by the Association of Forest Preschools in the Czech Republic focusing on comparison forest and state preschools (2011, 2012), monitoring the situation in forest preschools and forest clubs during covid pandemic (2020) or the most recent mapping the state and needs of forest preschools (2021–2023). International studies focusing on forest preschools or outdoor education in early childhood connecting with children's agency occurred in the search more frequently, but often seeing children's agency in the perspective of active agent in sustainability (Borg and Gericke, 2021; Caiman & Lundegård, 2014; Elliott, Årlemalm-Hagsér & Davis, 2020; Konerman, Elliott, Pugh, Luthy & Carr, 2021) than studying solely the children's agency on its own in the environment of forest preschools.

To conclude, the literature review indicated that the concept of children's agency, within early childhood arena particularly, is still rather emerging and calls for further exploration. Besides, the emergent state of the theme can be seen in line with what childhood sociologists claim for, that it is time for acknowledging the process of reconstructing childhood. The studies identified within the literature review clearly mirrored the challenges of conceptualising children's agency within the theoretical framework. The hardness to found wider support in literature can also be seen positively. As the notion of children's agency definitely is timely and crucial (as recognized by the OECD in the Future of Education and Skills 2030, several states within their educational curriculums), there is a potential to bring something new to scholar arena and educational practice as well. Concretely in the Czech Republic the notion of children's agency within early education is not yet elaborated, the search indicated just two studies and not yet within the preschool environment.

Furthermore, the other main feature of the proposed study, to look at children's agency from children's standpoint and within their interactions and to investigate their perspectives on their own agency in preschool settings, has appeared rather scarcely in search of literature database. Several studies could be identified from the perspectives of teachers or focusing on teaching methods to support, enable or enhance children's agency in early childhood education but rarely departing from the perspective of children.

4 Outline of conceptual foundations of the study

Anchoring the study in the theoretical tenets of the sociology of childhood, I depart from the view that childhood is socially constructed and agree with the proposed shift and importance of studying children's being, interactions and culture from their own perspective primarily, not only in connections to adults and their roles in constructing the childhood. I also share the view that we all, children and adults are becomings, beings on the endless path to become. In this way, I see children as being able to construct and reconstruct their childhood, their relationships, and lives. However, I perceive children's agency as being based in social relations; agency does not stand independently from relations. In line with Abebe's elaboration of 3 disputable assumptions, I follow his suggestion of concentrating on the question of what kind of agency children have and how they exercise it rather than examine if children have agency or not or normatively measure it as positive or negative, or concentrate on quantity, how much agency a child have.

Moreover, I consider, similarly to Baraldi, the relation of participation and agency problematic. Specifically, to view the manifestation of children's agency mainly through children's level of participation and decision-making in the educational process I see as one-sided. It is quite striking that the OECD in its current project, the Learning Compass for 2030, prevails the notion of participation deriving from the Hart's model of participation when describing the co-agency despite the critiques of the model over the years and even the critical voice of the author himself. Hart in his reflection on the model in 2008 recognizes openly that the model "addresses only a rather narrow range of ways that most children in the world participate in their communities...and it is largely limited to describing the varying roles adults play in relation to children's participation" (p. 20). Further in this reflection, he acknowledges that the model was created mainly from the perspective of the Minority World and thus, he calls for bringing the valuable practices from the Majority World when creating new models of children's participation. As he concludes, "I see the ladder lying in the long grass of an orchard at the end of the season...it has served its purpose...I look forward to the next season for I know there are so many different routes up through the branches and better ways to talk about how children can climb into meaningful, and shall we say fruitful, ways of working with others" (ibid., p. 29). Furthermore, the child's participation and decision-making in preschools, similarly as free choice and free play are phenomena conditioned by the character of preschools itself as socially constructed institutions with its social order, rules and power relations between children and adults. The level of participation and decision-making or free choice will always be influenced by the restrictions of social structure and social order. Moreover, as some presented studies depicted (Markström & Halldén, 2009; Sheridan & Pramling Samuelsson, 2001; Wood, 2014), the agency was identified in rather opposed actions to active participation such resistance, avoidance, silence, sabotage or pretence.

Consequently, I comply with the viewpoints on conceptualising children's agency that embrace the children's life in the perspective of the continuum of events and evolvment and the interdependency of relations that child is situated in. Therefore, within the analysis I attempt to approach children's agency not only as a manifestation of autonomy, competence or coping strategies, but as various life actions and strategies that depart from dynamics of their life and relations. Several studies already indicate that children's agency needs to be seen as a multifaceted concept including contradictory elements (Rainio & Hilppö, 2017).

5 Context of the study – ECEC in the Czech Republic

In this section, I describe the context of this study, the national education system and particularly early childhood education and care (ECEC) in the Czech Republic, with the attempt to provide an overall view on the placement of the research field, and thus collection of research data. First, I introduce shortly Czech national education system, then I continue with brief history of ECEC in the Czech Republic following the current situation. The last section is devoted to the description of forest preschool education in the Czech Republic as the data are collected in a forest preschool.

5.1 National education system in the Czech Republic

The state administration of the education system in the Czech Republic is ensured by the Czech Ministry of Education, Youth and Sports (MEYS). The main legal document is Act No. 561/2004 Coll., on preschool, elementary, secondary, higher professional, and other education known as Education Act, that governs the school foundation and operation in the Czech Republic. Public preschools and elementary schools are founded and run by communal municipalities and encompass the compulsory education, whereas the county municipalities establish and run secondary schools (high schools/grammar schools, lyceums, vocational secondary schools, conservatories, and tertiary vocational schools). MEYS based on Education Act manages the registration of preschools and schools to the Register of Schools and Educational Facilities (the Register) and thus, all institutions registered there are obliged to follow the requirements set in the Education Act and other directives determined by the MEYS. All preschools and schools registered in the Register are under supervision and education quality evaluation of Czech School Inspectorate. These institutions can also receive the state financial subsidiary for operation and teaching personnel.

The Czech school year runs from September 1 until June 30. Children start the mandatory school attendance usually at the 6 years of age and within, the first school year they turn 7. Children who are born between July 1 and August 30 usually starts the school when they are 7 years of age². Enrolment to primary school attendance takes place during April.

5.2 Early Childhood Education and Care in the Czech Republic

5.2.1 Brief history of ECEC in the Czech Republic

First institutions for early childhood care were established in the Czech Republic from 1930s in forms of ‘children’s shelters’. These institutions were mostly inspired by conceptions of kindergarten of F. Fröbel and French creches. As the first programme for preschool education with practical instruction can be considered a document *Preschool* written by a preschool teacher J. V. Svoboda, issued in 1839. The first institution named as preschool were opened in January 1869 in Prague but the term preschool was applied uniformly from 1934. For children under year of 3 of age were established creches from 1854 especially for children from socially disadvantaged family background. During the time of independent state of Czechoslovakia (1918–1938) continued the foundation of creches and preschools under the Ministry of Social Care. Therefore, personnel working there were mostly nurses or foster

² There is a legal possibility that children aged 5 by the time of the enrolment to primary schools and thus turning 6 within the first school year can be admitted to the primary education but they need to undergo an assessment of school readiness for early start of mandatory school attendance and receive recommendation from Pedagogical-psychological Counselling Centre.

persons, and qualified teachers started to be more common from 1936 when there was available program at School of Higher Studies of Pedagogy. After the World War II, the development of institutions of ECEC continued to grow. Interestingly, from 1945, both nurseries (for children from 3–4 months of age to 3 years) and preschools (for children from 3 years of age to 6) were considered as a part of school system, legislatively confirmed in 1948 that was very progressive for that time as this complex view on ECEC is a trend in many recent conceptions of ECEC. However, the complex view on early care and preschool education were not revived after the occupation and communist era of the Czech Republic (1968–1989). After 1989 the need of ‘collective’ preschool education was called into question that brought a decline of participation of children in preschools and mainly nurseries. Peculiarly, from 2013 nurseries were exempted from administration of Ministry of Health and Care but were not transferred to Ministry of Education, and subsequently, the state administration of nurseries was abolished. The only state regulation since 2013 is that nurseries can be established privately as a tied trade, meaning there are qualification requirements for nursery personnel set by the state. Another alternative are Children’s Groups that were approved by the law in 2014 and fall under administration of Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs (described more broadly in the following paragraph).

5.2.2 Current nature of ECEC in the Czech Republic

The Czech preschools were originally designed for children from 3 to 6 years of age, but since 2016, September 1, children from 2 years of age can also be accepted though only if the capacity of a preschool permits. Consequently, from 2017, February 1 the national curriculum for pre-primary education (FEP PE) was updated with chapters that describe the preschool education for children from 2 to 3 years of age. According to Education Act, it is a legal obligation for municipalities to provide a placement for a child turning three years (and permanently residing in the municipality) until the beginning of the school year, but the education is not compulsory, and therefore parents/legal guardians can decide for other alternatives.

A typical municipality run preschool has preschool classes up to 24 children, but can be raised up to 28 children, while the minimum is 15 children for one-class preschool (however, if it is the only preschool in the municipality, the minimum is 13 children). If a child 2 years of age or a child with special needs is enrolled to the preschool class, the maximum number of children is reduced by 2 children. Since 2015, there is set a minimum of 2,5 hours of direct educational work ensured by 2 preschool teachers at one class. Usually, 2 preschool teachers are appointed to one preschool class but as their work hours are divided in morning/afternoon shifts, within usual 10 operating hours per day (the maximum is set to 12 hours per day) the overlapping period is no more than 2,5 hours. The fulltime position of a preschool teacher is standardized weekly as 31 hours of direct pedagogical work in preschool class and 9 hours of non-direct pedagogical work dedicated to planning and pedagogical documentation. Preschool teacher qualification can be obtained either by completing secondary education specialised in pre-primary education, or by completing higher vocational schools or university in a bachelor’s or master’s study programme in pre-primary education.

There are several types of preschools. If sorted by the type of the founder, there are public preschools run by the municipalities and private preschools. There are also denominational preschools that are founded by a registered church or denominational association with an authorisation to establish schools/preschools. All types can be registered in the Register if they fulfil requirements stated in Education Act.

As demand of early childhood care for children younger than 2 years has grown together with insufficient capacity of preschools for 2 and 3 years old, in spring 2014 the draft of Act on Children’s Groups has been launched and by November 29, 2014, Act on Providing Care for Children in a Children’s Group no. 247/2014 was approved by the government. Children’s Groups are open for children from 6 months until beginning of primary school attendance, thus children up to 6 or 7 years of age. However, Children’s Groups are not under the responsibility of MEYS as other preschools, but they are governed by the Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs (MoLSA). It follows the historical mode

of nursery/day care centres that were originally under Ministry of Health as I mentioned above. The Children's Groups can be established by a municipality but more often the founders are non-profit organisations or civic associations or companies for their employees or by public entities or individuals. Naturally, the Children's Groups are not registered in the Register, thus are not obliged to follow the curricular documents and are not subjects of education quality evaluation of Czech School Inspectorate. However, MoLSA has issued quality standards and guidelines for creation of Education and Care Plan that shall play the similar role as curricular documents in preschools registered under MEYS. Also, the qualification requirements of Children's groups personnel differ from preschool institutions – one person shall be qualified as a nurse or health and social worker or paramedic completed at least on the secondary level of education or via professional qualification Childminder for children in the children's group accredited by MoLSA and newly since July, 1, 2022. If there is child older than 3 years of age, one person shall be also qualified in pre-primary education similarly as in typical preschool registered under MEYS. Maximum number of children in one children's group is 24 but average number is 12. From amount of 7 children, 2 carers/teachers must be present, for the group of 13 children with at least one child under two years of age, already 3 carers/teachers must be present.

Since September 2017 the last preschool year of a child before the start of primary school (the mandatory school attendance) has become obligatory. The last preschool year is commonly defined by the child's 6th birthday within that school year. Some children can be given permission to postpone the beginning of primary school attendance and then their last preschool year is when they turn seven.

This mandatory year of preschool education is provided free of charge by a preschool registered in the Register (Previous years in preschools can often be subject to certain fees according to the funder of the preschool.). There are three options to complete the mandatory year of preschool attendance. First, by regular attendance in a preschool registered in the Register, it must be minimum 4 hours every workday excluding state school holidays. Second, by individual so-called home-schooling pre-primary education mode where the children can attend any non-registered preschool/children's group or even be home-schooled. Yet, these children need to attend "a verification of achieved level of expected outputs", basically the verification of a child's readiness for primary education. It is organised in the local preschool registered in the Register and it has commonly a form of a conversation between a child and a preschool director/preschool teacher, usually in the time span of 20 – 30 minutes. The parents/legal guardians are present and are part of the verification process as well, the preschool personnel places questions to them too. The verification takes place between November and December of the mandatory preschool year. The third option is to attend preparatory classes organised by primary schools during the mandatory year of preschool education. These preparatory classes were established predominantly for children with a diagnosed unbalanced development, often also children who have been granted a postponement of primary school attendance. The admission to preparatory classes is based on parents/legal guardians' application to the school principal supported by recommendations from Pedagogical-psychological Counselling Centre or Special Education Counselling Centre to attend these classes.

5.3 Forest preschool education in the Czech Republic

In this section, I mention a brief evolution of forest preschool education in the Czech Republic first, followed by a short description of Czech forest preschool with the official status of preschool institution as this type of forest preschool is the selected case. I end the section by a depiction of how a typical day in a forest preschool institution looks.

5.3.1 Brief evolution of forest preschool education in the Czech Republic

The inspiration of forest preschool education came to the Czech Republic mostly from Germany but also from Scandinavian countries. However, there were movements that could be considered as predecessor of forest preschools, namely the Children's Farm project on an island in Prague run by the writer, archaeologist, and pedagogue Eduard Štorch in the 1926–1934. In 1994, one of the first educator

in the field of ecological education, Emilie Strejčková founded the Ecological Center 'Toulcův Dvůr' in Prague with a main goal of bringing the ecological and environmental education to the school education. Moreover, in 2003 she established a first ecologically oriented preschool 'Semínko' whereas from 2010 this preschool has had one class established as a forest class. As a first Czech forest preschool is considered 'Green School' established as a forest club in Liberec in 2006, soon after, in 2009, another three forest clubs were founded in Prague, Řevnice and Tišnov. In 2011, the founders of the first three forest clubs established Association of Forest Preschools in the Czech Republic with the main aim to make forest preschools legislatively legitimate institutional option within Czech pre-primary education. This was reached in 2016, effective from September, the 1, namely by Act No. 178/2016 Coll. which amends Act No. 561/2004 Coll. known as Education Act. Thus, a definition of a forest preschool was added to the Education Act, in the § 34, section 9 as follows: A forest preschool is considered a preschool in which education takes place primarily in outdoor spaces out of the indoor premises of the preschool, which are only used for occasional stays. The indoor premises of the forest preschool must not be a building (MEYS, 2016, p. 29). In 2021, there were around 200 forest preschools/clubs in the Czech Republic according to Association of Forest preschools.

5.3.2 Types of forest preschool institutions in the Czech Republic

Currently, there are several types of forest preschool institutions from the legislative point of view in the Czech Republic, a forest preschool, a forest club and a forest class. I describe the main characteristics briefly below.

5.3.2.1 Forest preschool with the official status of a preschool institution

A preschool with the official status of a forest preschool is defined in Education Act (561/2004 Coll, in the current version) as stated above. To be able to reach the official status as a forest preschool, such preschool needs to fulfil the state requirements and be registered in the Register of Schools and Educational Facilities and thus, have legitimate status of preschool institution in the Czech Republic. Hence, the operational and organisational regulations are legally set and obligatory as for any other regular preschool (state or private) registered in the Register. (The operating conditions and equipment of forest preschools are described in more detail in §9 of Decree 410/2005 Coll.) Among main regulations, it is mandatory for such forest preschools to follow the national curriculum for pre-primary education (FEP PE) and so to have School Education Program (SEP) stated and educate accordingly. Also, such preschools are under regular supervision of the Czech School Inspectorate (CSI) that is a national controlling institution of quality in education together with controls of Public Health Protection Authority (Regional Hygiene Office).

As registered, the forest preschools are entitled to receive the state financial contributions to their operation and teaching staff. Generally, the founders of forest preschools are non-profit organizations or associations, in a small amount also municipalities. In case of being founded by municipality, the preschool fees are usually similar as in any regular municipal preschools, so the operation of such preschool is financed from the municipal budget. Forest preschools founded by different bodies must finance their operation mainly from school fees paid by parents/legal guardians. Irrespectively to the founder, in case of registered forest preschools, parents/legal guardians can deduct (to the certain amount) the paid school fees from their assessed income tax. Furthermore, the forest preschools are allowed to realize the mandatory year of preschool attendance (the school year before a child shall start the primary school, the compulsory education).

5.3.2.2 Forest club

A status of a forest club remained since the establishment of the first forest preschools in the Czech Republic. However, those forest preschools are not officially named preschools and cannot be registered in the national Register. In this way, they are not entitled to receive any fundings from the state for their operation and teaching staff. The operation of the forest clubs is not a subject of mandatory controls of Czech School Inspectorate, the forest clubs are not required to follow the national curriculum for pre-primary education (FEP PE) although they often do together with having the School Education

Programme also created. The current Czech legislative system does not recognize childcare and educational services for children of preschool age under terms such as children's club, forest club etc. Thus, forest clubs as preschool childcare services are established either as a trade or as a non-profit activity. In the case of a trade, it is subject to the establishment of a private facility for preschool children to the terms of Trade Act No. 455/1991 Coll., specifically free trades, no. 21 Out-of-school/leisure time education and training, organization of courses, training, including tutoring activities. Most of the forest clubs are established as a non-profit organization, most often as a civic association according to Act 83/1990 Coll. on the association of citizens. According to the Czech legislation, a non-profit organization does not have to meet the requirements placed on the premises and the operation of preschools registered in the Register. This follows from §7 paragraph 1 of the Act on the protection of public health and from the implementing Decree of the Ministry of Health No. 410/2005 Coll., where hygienic requirements for premises and operation of facilities and establishments are set for the education of children and adolescents. Nevertheless, the mutual agreement of parents/legal guardians and founders of forest club in a form of the informed consent to the conditions of eating, hygiene, safety etc. is often established.

As there is no legislative regulation regarding the educational operation and organisation, the forest clubs are a flexible option as for instance there is no requirement on operating hours (no need to have a five-day all-day operation whereas min. 6.5 hours daily), no qualification requirements of the educators and the headmaster. The operation of the club is mainly financed by the school fees paid by parents/legal guardians. The forest clubs are not allowed to realize the mandatory year of preschool attendance. However, the children attending the forest club often enter a regime of individual so-called home school regime of pre-primary education during his/her mandatory year of preschool attendance and in this way, they can complete the last year of pre-primary education in the forest club. Other alternative is that a child in his/her mandatory year of preschool attendance transfers to a local preschool or forest preschool registered in the Register.

5.3.2.3 Forest class

A forest class is group of children (a class) that is officially part of a regular “indoor” preschool, but the group/class spend most of the daily activities outdoors, often have their own premises (a yurt, renovated construction trailer/mobile home, cottage etc.) and uses a building of the regular preschool or their garden occasionally. As forest classes are within the regular preschools registered in the Register, the state financial subsidy, the supervision of CSI and the obligation to follow and implement the national curriculum (FEP and SEP) together with realization of the mandatory year of preschool attendance naturally applies to them.

5.3.3 A typical day in a Czech forest preschool

The most significant feature of the forest preschool education is that it is situated mostly outdoors, on a land, a large garden, often nearby a forest or a green area or a park. The indoor facilities are often a yurt, reconstructed construction trailer/mobile home or a wooden cabin or a garden house that are often used just for the rest time after lunch or occasionally for some activities. Meals are served most of the time outdoors, the morning snacks time usually happens during the trip to the nearby forests, so children carry the snack box with them, whereas lunch and afternoon snack is situated at the outdoor preschool premises, the dining area is often table under any sort of open shelter, often a pergola or a canopy. If there is no such place, the dining happens in the indoor premises.

In the outdoor preschool premises, there is often a ‘mud kitchen’, the alternative to a sand box with all sorts of “real” kitchen utensils. If the outdoor premises is a garden, garden beds or planting boxes can be often found with herbs, vegetables or edible flowers. There are composting toilets, often also together with specifically modified ground areas as toilets for children. The water for washing hands is always nearby, often in sort of barrels with a tap, the dining areas has one or more as well.

Each child has a backpack where she/he learns to carry the necessary things for being outside including extra clothes for a day but they all have a locker/shelf in the indoor facilities. The indoor facility has

always a heating for cold months. Also, books, creative and art supplies and games and other educational material is stored there.

The children's group usually consists of 16 children accompanied by 2 teachers, called guides. In the official forest preschools (registered in the Register and thus under state regulation), one of the teachers need to be a qualified preschool teacher, the second one needs to have a qualification of childminder (the qualification is accredited by the Ministry of Education, Youth and Sports).

6 Research task

The main aim of the study is to explore the exercise of children's agency and children's perspectives on their agency in a forest preschool environment in the Czech Republic in case study manners. I framed the research task with two broad questions:

- 1) How do children exercise their own agency in everyday activities and situations occurring in the forest preschool settings in the Czech Republic?
 - How and when the preschool children express their agency?
 - How do children realise their own agency specifically in relations among each other?
 - How do children realise their own agency specifically in relation to the teaching personnel and/or the researcher?

- 2) What perspectives do children have on their own agency in the forest preschool settings in the Czech Republic?
 - How children perceive their own agency, what perspectives and attitudes they have about it?

7 Methodology

In this part I first introduce the methodological framework of the research study, then describe the research methods employed accordingly and the selection of research site. Further, I continue with description of the process of data collection and data analysis. At the end of this chapter, I briefly state trustworthiness and credibility of data, ethical consideration and positioning myself as a researcher.

7.1 Methodological framework – case study

In this research, I depart from the epistemological positions of interpretivism with the focus on depicting the phenomena – children’s agency. The research approach is inductive, as Creswell (2013) describes, “emerging...from the ground up, rather than handed down entirely from a theory” (p. 22).

The research design is qualitative, the study is framed as exploratory case study with the aim to provide a detailed insight on children’s agency in forest preschool settings in the Czech Republic.

The case study is exploratory as the researcher’s interest lays in exploring the phenomenon – the children’s agency in the context, concretely in the Czech forest preschool settings. Moreover, as there have not been any research studies conducted on this theme in the Czech Republic, from the standpoints of children and within the forest preschool settings, the exploratory type of case study is applied to seek a deeper understanding of the phenomenon.

Based on the process of selection of research site, the case study is with a rationale of an unusual case as Yin (2018) classifies it. I concentrated on one Czech forest preschool with the aim to explore “a real-life, contemporary bounded system (a case) over time, through detailed, in-depth data collection involving multiple sources of information” (Creswell, 2013, p. 97). The selected preschool is seen unusual as elaborated further in selection of research site and its description. Shortly, there are very few forest preschools that would be founded by the municipality and situated nearby city centre having a large park serving as ‘the forest’. In this way, the preschool resembles the usual state preschool with its uniqueness of being outdoor situated. Furthermore, the preschool is also unusual as it does not openly follow any alternative approach such as Waldorf education that is rather common within forest preschools in the Czech Republic.

7.2 Research methods

In terms of methods, multiple methods were employed such as participant observations supported by audio recording and qualitative open-ended interviews in small focus groups. In following paragraphs, I describe the selected methods in more details.

7.2.1 Participant observation

Participant observation in ethnographical manners viewed as Roller & Lavrakas (2015): “...using in-context immersion to gather in-depth information about the beliefs, attitudes, and behaviours of those being observed...to live and breathe all that is experienced by those being observed” (p. 168) supported by audio recording is considered as a first source of data as it allows to study the research theme – children’s agency and how they realize the agency in preschool settings in its complexity and context.

7.2.2 Qualitative open-ended interviews in a format of small focus groups

I anticipated informal conversations between me and participants or what Silverman entitles as naturally occurring talks (2006, p. 206) or Patton states as informal conversation interviews in his description of

types of qualitative interviewing and what he relates to spontaneous generation of questions that “will flow from the immediate context” (1980, p. 342).

Accordingly, qualitative open-ended interviews were employed as secondary source of data. The selection of employment of interviews in small focus groups (2 – 3 participants) were based on participants’ expression of agreement to participate as it would be otherwise contradictory to the studied phenomena. (Naturally, the written consent of legal guardians of participant underage was gained). The form of interviews in small focus groups discussions were employed intentionally based on the fact of being interviewed in a group brings the possibility of interaction among the group participants that can enhance more close-to-live dynamics to the discussion (Roller & Lavrakas, 2015). Especially when conducting focus group discussions with children, it might enhance a more natural and therefore comfortable format for them to express their thoughts and attitudes in interaction with other children than with one-to-one interview with the adult – researcher (Cohen, 2007).

Regarding purpose for employment of interviews in qualitative way, I draw on suggestion of Byrne (2004) where she depicts the possible attractiveness of qualitative interviews for researchers in the way “to explore voices and experiences which they [researchers] believe have been ignored, misrepresented or suppressed in the past” (In Silverman, 2006, p. 121). On the other hand, the interviews “do not tell us directly about people’s experiences but instead, offer indirect representations of experiences” (Silverman, 2006, p. 125). In this way, I view the employment of interviews beneficial for the study as additionally to observation as it can possibly complement and bring other perspectives to the studied phenomena of children’s experiences of their agency such as if and how children perceive their agency, and what perspectives and attitudes they have about it.

7.3 Selection of research site

The selection of the forest preschool was in a nature of the purposive sampling as I defined following criteria:

- 1) being registered in the Register (under MEYS), thus following the official curriculum for preschool education,
- 2) age-heterogenous preschool unit.

I contacted several forest preschools fulfilling the criteria and two of them responded willingly to participate in the research. After the first visit of both of them and discussion with the main teachers, I decided to carry the research in one of them. It would certainly be interesting to conduct the research in both preschools but due to the limited time framework of master thesis, I decided for one preschool as it would allow me to immerse more deeply to the research site. Moreover, the selected preschool appeared to be unusual as it is among very few founded by a municipality and the location is in the city centre by a large park. Moreover, the selected forest preschool does not state that it is based in any alternative educational approach such as Waldorf or Intuitive pedagogy as many forest preschools in the Czech Republic do so. In this way, the selected research site is seen as unique having features as a regular preschool stemming from its founded body and common pedagogical approach and at the same time having features of forest preschools as being situated outdoors.

7.4 Data collection

Data collection was planned via participant observation and qualitative open-ended interviews/focus groups as mentioned earlier. Based on the discussion with head preschool teacher regarding the method of data recording (before entering the research field), audio recording was introduced to participants (children, pedagogical personnel) and their legal guardians together with handwritten field notes as main methods of data collection. On my first visit, I have introduced the audio recording to the participants and sought their verbal agreement and explained that they could decide to withdraw from the recording at any time as well as to tell me not to observe or participate in their play/activity. (Legal guardians and pedagogical personnel have received a letter describing the research plan and the data collection together

with detailed description of their rights in the informed consent). The consent from legal guardians of 19 children were received out of 20, the assent from children was received every time I started the audio recording. The audio recording was introduced and described to children at my first visits, each of them tried to record themselves and listened to it to have a clear understanding of the process of recordings. Then every time I audio-recorded an interaction among children, I reminded them about the recording and sought an assent. Specifically, following children and teachers under assigned pseudonyms participated in the research:

- 9 children 6 years of age: Ginny, Katie, Fanny, Ida, Peter, David, Henry, Ben, Richard
- 5 children 5 years of age: Edwin, Alvin, Thelma, Mary, Robin
- 2 children 4 years of age: Owen, Simon
- 3 children 3 years of age: Dereck, Cedrik, Jacob
- Teachers Wendy and Lina, teaching assistants Nora and Mandy

The observations were realised for 4 weeks, 4 days a week, 9am – 3pm (Monday to Wednesday and Friday as on Thursdays the children were on swimming training).

The interviews were realised within one day in the last week of being in the research site. They were conducted in groups of two or three children. Groups were formed naturally as the teacher called the kids to me as they played together in the morning during the free play period. Two children were interviewed individually (Fanny and Peter) as they played on their own and when asked if they wanted to be together or on their own, they both wanted to be interviewed separately. In total, 13 children assented to the interview (Richard, Owen, Katie, Ginny, Simon, Jacob, Cedrik, Alvin, Ben, Edwin, Peter, Fanny, Robin) out of 14. Henry did not want to participate in the interview. Moreover, I did not include data from the interview with Robin as neither me nor teachers were able to speak his mother tongue and his knowledge of Czech was limited as he had been in the country only for 2 months. Thus, 12 children in total were interviewed. Before starting each interview in the group/individually, I reminded each child about the purpose of it and the audio recording and asked for the assent.

7.5 Data analysis

The collected data from observation and open-ended interviews was transcribed verbatim by the researcher in the original language (Czech). The data were also analysed in the original language in order to sustain nuances and accuracy of the language that could otherwise be altered or lost if the data were translated prior the analysis. By analysing the data in the original language that it is my first language as well, I attempted to capture the depth and richness of the data with the connotations, implicit meanings, and other culturally specific characteristics. The findings were translated to English by the researcher herself, with full awareness that the translation can convey some mistranslating aspects as English is my second language. Nevertheless, I strived to capture the findings in English as accurately as possible, keeping the context sensitivity, cultural specifics and subtle meanings in focus.

Qualitative content analysis was applied on all transcribed data (derived from observation, audio recording and interviews/focus group discussions, field notes). That implies among others organizing data for analysis, coding and categorizing, seeking similarities, contradictions, patterns, and themes in all collected multi-layered texts (Cohen et, 2007; Mertens, 2010). The thematic analysis related to research questions was applied with the aim to seek a possible interconnectedness of the themes identified via coding process (Bryman, 2016; Creswell, 2014).

7.6 Validity and reliability – trustworthiness and credibility of data

One of the concerns regarding case study design is as Yin (2018) depicts, “the inability to generalize from case studies” (p. 52). However, the overall aim of this study is to explore and describe the children’s agency in a specific outdoor environment. Thus, the case is not seen as a sample and the generalisation

is placed on the level of analysis to attempt to “shed empirical light on some theoretical concepts and principles” (ibid., p. 73).

Another limitation can be seen in obtaining qualitative validity in case study research. In an attempt to secure the qualitative validity, so to say trustworthiness, accuracy and credibility of the findings, following procedures are applied (Creswell, 2014, pp. 201-203):

- thick description and triangulation of data sources:

By using several methods and sources of data in the study, my intention was to not only provide a rich description of the phenomena in a studied preschool unit but also cross-check the data in order to achieve greater confidence in findings.

- self – reflection of the researcher and my position in the research:

I kept a reflective field diary within the data collection and analysis with the attempt to perpetually critically reflect upon my preconceptions and prejudices that might intervene in the interpretation deriving from my socioeconomic, historical and cultural background and other characteristics such as gender, age and similar.

- presenting contradictory or incongruous findings whether occurred:

I attempted to detect and portray different perspectives upon the studied theme during the data collection and analysis including those that appear rather contradictory or negative towards the studied theme so the validity of the data can be enhanced.

- prolonged time spent in the field:

I attempted to reach an in-depth immersion in the field and therefore, spend sufficient time in the field (albeit limited by the framework of the Master thesis) in order to receive as much information of the field as possible with the aim of increasing accuracy to the findings and interpretation.

- peer-debriefing:

The peer debriefer was addressed for reviewing the process of data collection and analysis to enhance the accuracy and to prevent possible interferences deriving from the researcher's participant role in the research.

In an attempt to secure qualitative reliability, I attempted to keep a case study journal to record the steps and procedures taken within the study with the aim of assuring transparency and coherence of the study. Within the data analysis, I recorded codes in a simple codebook for having them accessible for their cross-checking by peer debriefer.

7.7 Ethical Considerations

As the study concerns persons differing in age, informed consents were employed on several levels. Regarding children attending the preschool, as they are under the age of eighteen, the informed consent in the form of a written document was directed to children's parents/legal guardians and the signatures were obtained. Moreover, as in line with the studied phenomena – children's agency, I informed children first and foremost verbally about my study and the content of it, explained the data collection methods and sought each child's verbal agreement upon planned procedures (observations, audio recordings, interviews/focus group discussions, copying children's drawings etc.) in every entrance of the research field. Also, I have reminded repeatedly the possibility and emphasize their right to withdraw at any time without the need to expressing any reason and that it will as respected as willing to be a part of the study. In that way, I strive for a child's understanding of their rights to make their own decisions whether they

want to participate or not, rights to select ways/methods of data collection they feel comfortable for their participation. Concerning adults operating within the preschool unit/s the study will take place – preschool teachers and preschool teacher’s assistants, the written informed consent signed was gained as well. Similarly, I sought agreement and comprehension of the participants of age upon their rights to withdraw at any time of the study. In concern of ensuring the confidentiality and anonymity of all participants, names of participants are coded as well as the location and the name of the preschool.

7.8 Positioning myself as a researcher

As being in the role of participant observer in the research site, the informal conversations occurred on regular basis as children (participants) often included me in their plays and everyday routines. I assume that my introduction as a researcher, a writer, as someone who comes to observe and then is going to write a book about them how they play together, how they talk to each other, how they live their every day in their preschool helped children to understand my role and was easier to invite me in the plays and activities. I also expressed that I can be part of their plays, activities should they wish to include me but I can also just observe their play, discussions etc. However, this position of being an adult so being on the side of teachers/teaching assistants and on the other side someone who is available there to play brought some interesting moments regarding power dynamics between me and children.

As a researcher in the role of participant observer, the self-reflection on my positionality and potential preconceptions was crucial. The awareness and sensitivity to the fact that my positionality is determined in certain extend by my cultural and socio-economic background, life experiences, and the selected theoretical lenses led me to critically approach my position and question my assumptions, scrutinise the viewpoints on conceptualization of agency and any preconceptions of agency of children from the position of an adult. By remaining open and attentive throughout the process, seeking the diverse perspectives, I strived to mitigate my preconceptions and possible misinterpretation of agentic actions of children as well as their perspectives on their own agency.

7.9 Statement regarding sustainability

The aim of this study, to explore and depict how children exercise their agency in everyday life in a forest preschool and inquire what perspectives they have on their own agency is connected to sustainability on several levels. As mentioned earlier, the theme of agency is connected with UN Sustainable Development Goals as it explicitly declared that “children and young women and men are critical agents of change and will find in the new Goals a platform to channel their infinite capacities for activism into the creation of a better world” (United Nations, 2015, p. 12). Moreover, the fact that the study is located in the outdoor environment, it depicts the opportunities for connection of children and their agency with the nature and how to foster the hands-on relation with the natural environment and in this way lay the foundation for environmentally conscious attitudes and actions already in early age.

By exploring how children exercise agency in a forest preschool setting, this research study strives to contribute to enrichment of the educational practices for sustainable development that recognize children as agentic beings in their learning and everyday life.

8 Research site

The forest preschool is located in one of the city districts of the Czech Republic that consists of one preschool unit of 20 children at the age of 3–5 together with four adults, two preschool teachers and two preschool teacher's assistants. The forest preschool is one of the few in the Czech Republic that it is founded by the municipality. Also, the location is rather specific as well, it is located within the central city district and on the edge of a large city park that serves as 'the forest'. The schoolyard is quite specific too, it is partly green area with high trees and grass (backyard) and partly open space with a concrete yard (frontyard). The preschool has three mobile homes, one for indoor activities and storage of different educational materials and children's clothes, one for rest time for children, both situated in the front area of the yard together with a roofed dining area with tables and chairs that is also used for realising different educational projects and art activities. There is also a circle made of logs for sitting, with a fireplace in the middle, where the morning circle is realised. In the backyard, there is a third mobile home with one toilet for children and one for teachers and there is also a storage for different garden tools.

The day is usually started in the circle where children and teachers greet each other and share some interesting moments from their life. The teacher then introduces the theme or project that they will be working on in the morning block, then they have a morning snack in the circle and then the planned activity is realised. After that, there is time for so called free play or child-initiated activities until lunchtime. After lunch time some children are picked-up by parents, some stay and have a rest time for approximately hour and half in the mobile home or outside on the blankets during summer hot days. Children who do not need to sleep anymore usually rest with a book or can speak softly among each other. After rest time, the free play continues until children go home. Children who are in their last year of preschool attendance have once a week an hour of school preparation activities instead of rest time. The teachers introduce activities preparing those children for writing, counting and reading in form of worksheets, riddles, board games and similar. Also, children come to the morning in different time so there is also opportunity for playing 'freely' before the circle time. The working scheme of the pedagogical personnel is designed so that each day a preschool teacher and an assistant was teamed for one half of the school day and the other pair consequently worked the other half of the school day whereas all four are usually present during lunch time.

9 Findings

In the following chapter, the findings of the study in connection to the research questions will be presented. The themes that arose from the thematic analysis of collected data will be mostly introduced and depicted on short narratives to provide the background and richness. Moreover, as the studied theme – children’s agency is viewed as part of children’s everyday life together with its relational interdependency and as a continuum, the narrative format of data presentation is considered as well-suited.

I divided the findings into two parts according to my research questions. First, I depict how children exercised their agency in everyday activities deriving mainly from the participant observations. Secondly, I focus on the research question regarding children’s perspectives and attitudes about their own agency departing predominantly from the open-ended interviews (small focus groups).

9.1 Children’s agency in preschool’s everyday life

Within the research quest for capturing children’s agency in preschool’s everyday life, several themes were recognised, namely agency in free play and exploration in the outdoor environment, agency in child-initiated activities, agency in adult-initiated activities, agency in situations of challenging the rules of the preschool and negotiating and agency in situations of presenting one’s abilities.

9.1.1 Agency in free play and exploration in the outdoor environment

It was visible within the observations and appeared quite frequently in the naturally occurred conversations too that children expressed that they enjoy playing freely in the preschool “natural” environment, mostly in the mud kitchen and in the green backyard (there is a green area, climbing trees, swings, herb spiral and a sand area). As it is an uneven semi-natural ground, puddles create easily there. After one rainy night, several children were playing there, telling me that it is great when it rains in the evening the day before so the next day, they can build towns and rivers and lakes. Within one observation Ben, Edwin and Simon were playing in the sand area with using the water from the puddles. I approached and asked what they were doing, and Ben replied, “*we are in the laboratory, it is our laboratory*”.

Moreover, it was apparent within the observation that the teachers applied very little supervision during the time of free play so children could play in the backyard as they like without a teacher being present. Thus, the children’s agency manifested there mostly in children’s autonomy in the play, imagination and assertiveness. The freedom and the value of free play were expressed by the children also in the interviews when several of them identified that the free play is the space and time that they can do things entirely according to themselves and that is something they like it a lot (more below in the section 9.2).

In the following observation I would like to depict agency of Peter when rainwater caught his interest, his goal-setting and autonomous work, trying to reach the goal and solve the problem, recognizing he needs support, then seeking support and ending the project with satisfaction even not fully reaching the goal set.

Obs. 1: Letting the river flow

The day was quite warm but rainy. Some children were in the mobile home, some were playing under the shelter, some in the mud kitchen using the rainwater caught in the pots there. After Peter arrived at the preschool, he spotted a little stream running from the frontyard to the downyard as it is slightly downhill. He went right away to explore it. He asked me if I can go down with him as he was currently

not allowed to be in the backyard without an adult presence. I agreed so he could follow the stream all the way to the back area. He was excited about it and told me: “wow, it’s a river”. At one point, the stream was hindered by a hole and could not continue to flow further. Peter got interested in this and started to work on it so he could build the riverbanks around so the stream can continue further to the sand area. He tried several things but without success. At one point, he got a bit frustrated and approached me: “it does not work, I do not know how to make the stream flow further, can you help me?”. I asked what he thinks it needs. He replied: “it gets stuck there, there is a hole, and it is hard, I cannot dig so it will flow from the hole”. I nodded with understanding and suggested “you might need to redirect the river, so it avoids the hole...do you have any ideas how to do it?”. He got back his excitement and shouted: “I know, I know, we take sand and build it here and here”, showing how he will create riverbanks, “so it can flow that way” and run for the sand. However, soon he realized that the sand is not the best material for the riverbanks and approached me again disappointedly: “look, it does not hold”. I replied, “I see...the sand does not work...do you know what the riverbanks are usually consisted of that could be harder?”. He answered defeated: “mud but that it is the same as sand”. I replied, “true but you could put something there to fasten it”. He asked: “like what? branches?” I nodded and added “or stones”. He got his excitement back again, “yes, the stones are often around river...can you help me find some and I’ll get the mud”. At this moment, Fanny came to ask what he was doing. He explained and asked if she wanted to help. She replied: “yes, I’ll go get some stones from the frontyard”. Soon after they had to interrupt the play as it was time for a morning circle and activity, but Peter got back to it after and succeeded partially. He seemed to be satisfied that he accomplished it even though he described: “it does not flow as much...but it is alright”.

Further, during free play periods of the daily regime, a mud kitchen was often area that children played. Several times, the children included me naturally to their play, asking me if I want to play with them. In the following observations I depict two such situations. First, the interaction with Owen, I would like to draw the attention to how he uses his agency to direct our play together, sometimes taking my suggestions in the questions, sometimes not and correcting me if it is not exactly as he meant (not birthday party but birthday, how to say his sister’s name).

Obs. 2: Owen baking a birthday cake

- O. “Do you want to play with me?”
 R. “Yes, what do you do? A cake, a birthday cake?”
 O. “Yes, but it is probably a chocolate muffin.”
 R. “And would you add strawberries and raspberries?”
 O. “Yes.”
 R. “On the top?”
 O. “Yep...on the top, I had such cake on birthday of someone else and I know who...”
 R. “Really, so you were on birthday party?”
 O. “No, on birthday.”
 R. “I see, so you were somewhere and ate such cake there...”
 O. “Also my mum was there and almost whole our family...only those I did not know, so they were not there anymore...my sister too and cousin too...”
 R. “I see. What is your sister’s name?”
 O. “Alice.”
 R. “Oh, that’s almost like my name, I am sometimes called Alice too.”
 O. “Alice does not like it when she is called Alicka.”
 R. “I see, and what does she like?”
 O. “For example Aline nebo Alelelene.”
 R. “Alelene?”
 O. “No, Alelelene...”
 R. “Alelelene?”
 O. “No, Alelelelene...”

- R. "Oh, so I don't think I am able to say it..."
 O. "You can also call her Ala or Ali."

Owen's expression of agency can be also seen how he navigates between the reality with the imagnate play:

- R. "And can you cut a slice or we will eat it from the pot?"
 O. "I will cut a slice."
 R. "OK, thank you."
 O. "Do you want more? It serves like this with hands."
 R. "Sure."
 ...
 R. "So what is it in it?"
 O. "Milk chocolate and I added a bit of caster sugar and flour."
 R. "That's so yummy, thank you."
 O. "I will put it back on the cake again so I could cook something else from it again."

9.1.2 Agency in child-initiated activities

This episode started two days before I entered the research site. The start of this project was described to me by one of the teachers and then Ben, who came up with the idea, talked about it also within the interview when I asked about it. The children's agency is apparent throughout the whole activity as there was very little intervention from the teachers, Ben introducing the idea and showing other children how to make the books, children deciding how and where they are going to sell the books, supporting each other when selling the books, David suggesting the voting for things they are going to buy etc.

Obs. 3: Creating publishing house and bookstore

Ben came one day with a handmade book that he created it at home by himself with parents showing him how to do. His friends (mainly Katie, Fanny, David, Simon, Edwin, Owen) got interested and wanted to create them as well. They started to work on them with Ben telling them how to do it. The teacher described the children spent the great amount of time and kept the interest, other children joint too so she encouraged them with some open questions, statements to support the activity, e.g. what they are going to do with the books, what kind of books they create etc. The children then decided that in their wooden house in the front-yard, they will open their bookstore and sell the books. The teacher went along with it and ask what they are going to do with all the money earned from the bookstore. The children came up with many proposals of different toys to the preschool and it started to be a bit chaotic so one of the children (David) came up with an option to vote about it, the teacher suggested that they can do it with all children within the morning circle so all children can vote and they came to the agreement about it. They also talked about the value of money and practice counting, estimate and other pre-mathematical skills as the children asked the teacher. The teachers and children agreed also that the teachers could vote too as they are willing to add the rest of the money needed for decided items to buy.

9.1.3 Agency in adult-initiated activities

The adult-initiated activities were often realised in the morning after the morning circle, with evocation starting in the morning circle. It occurred quite regularly that the adult-led activity was initiated first by teachers, by setting the rules of a game or instructions of the art project, but later throughout the activity the children often could change the course of the activity or leave once tried or in case of art projects they could do it according to themselves. In the following two observation excerpts, I describe two adult-initiated activities and depict the manifestation of children's agency within them. First, the activity led by a teaching assistant Nora was an auditory memory game that had set rules.

Obs. 4: The auditory memory game

The auditory memory game was created by a teaching assistant Nora. She collected different materials from the preschool environment, concretely sand, sawdust, stones, thumbtacks, and grass and hid them in the small containers (the plastic containers from Kinder Surprise). Each two of them contained the same type of materials, so all together the game consists of 10 containers. The children were so excited to play it and it was challenging for them to wait for their turns. The disappointment was arising with more pairs found, but the teaching assistant kept assuring that they will play it again until everyone finds at least one pair. When playing the second round, those who already found one got impatient and wanted to go play freely. The teaching assistant tried to motivate them to stay and watch the game, but soon more children found the matching pair, talked to each other, or tried to advice those who was still playing so it was getting chaotic and hard for those who still did not find the matching pair and needed to listen to the sounds of the materials. The children for some time tried to obey the instructions to stay and watch but at one point, Edwin, Simon, Henry, Owen, and David left the place where the game was to nearby locks and started to play freely. The teacher noticed but did not call them back or comment on children leaving the game. At some point Edwin asked if they can go to play in the backyard. Nora allowed and continued to supervise the game until all kids found a pair each and then she offered the game to those who stayed playing till the end to let them play with it as they like.

In the beginning, the children expressed the agency in compliance with following the rules and playing the game and watching the game once they found the matching pair. As the game continued, the children's agency turned from compliance to the agentic strategies such as withdrawal or subversion as the children did not ask for permission and at one moment just left the place where the game was played. However, as the teaching assistant expressed that the goal of the game is that everyone shall try and find a pair, children who left for play fulfilled the aim of the game and decided independently that the game came to its end, so as the period of activities led by the teachers/teaching assistants.

In the second observation excerpt, I depict the agency and its evolvement and changes within an adult-initiated art activity when all children were creating an invitation poster for preschool's annual garden party together with parents. I leave this observation excerpt in the original discussion as it depicts greatly the evolvement of agency, the changes, and the continuum of aspects from one side to another: assertiveness – submission, negotiation – conflict, emotional venting of excitement, happiness vs. frustration, anger, sadness.

Obs. 5: Creating an invitation poster together for preschool's garden party

The teacher Wendy evoked the activity by giving questions to children, e.g. what they are going to create, what an invitation is, how an invitation can look like, what the reasons of the poster are and what it needs to be written there. All children were sitting around the table, exciting about the project. Then she initiated the creation:

Teacher Wendy: "OK, great. So, I propose that we start with writing, for example Mary can write 'invitation for', then Peter knows how to write, he can write 'when' and 'what time' and someone else can, who dares to?"

Ginny: "I do not."

Edwin: "I."

T. Wendy: "So Edwin can write the word programme."

Edwin: "But I do not know what it is."

T. Wendy: "What we are going to do there."

Edwin: "I see."

T. Wendy: "Children, what does it mean - programme?"

Katie: "What we are going to do there."

Mary: "Like in Planetarium."

T. Wendy: *"Yes, exactly."*

Fanny (frustrated): *"I also wanted to write something."*

Teacher W.: *"You will also write something, do not worry. We divide the words."*

Ginny: *"Everybody will do, somebody will both write and paint."*

Fanny: *"No, for the toy party, haha."*

Edwin: *"For the killing party, haha."*

Fanny: *"I'll write: for the garden."*

David voicing her what to write.

Fanny: *"I know, David, I know, I'm not stupid."*

Mary do not know yet how to write so she voices different syllables and letters to while away, make fun.

Mary: *"ta, k, ku, pa, k, p..."*

Owen, Simon, Andrew repeats after her.

Fanny: *"There is N-A-Z..."*

Teaching Assistant Nora: *"You will confuse her and the parents won't come because they will get lost somewhere on the way."*

The children do it even more to make fun and confuse Fanny.

Peter (angrily): *"Stop it, Mary."*

T. Wendy: *"Do not confuse her."* (to all children)

T. Wendy.: *"Fanny? Or OK, continue it as you like."*

...

David: *"Can I write 'the party'?"*

...

Ida: *"Wendy, I want to paint now."*

T. Wendy (funnily): *"It is a test of your patience."*

...

Children around talking, some of them reading what it is already written.

T. Wendy: *"Hang on, do not confuse him."*

David (imploringly): *"Be quiet, you are totally confusing me."*

T. Wendy: *"So we are going to be quiet for a while so we do not confuse him."*

Teacher helping with letters.

...

Fanny (critically): *"This is too big, Dave, even bigger than mine."*

...

Mary: *"Big N should be there."*

Fanny and Katie: *"NO!"*

David (angrily): *"Mary! Be quiet, you all are totally confusing me."*

Fanny: *"You were also confusing me."*

Mary: *"Pete, can you read it?"*

Fanny: *"I will read it."*

T. Wendy: *"So you know what? We will do this way, now we will nicely paint and then we somewhere write...we will keep an empty space here or here and there we write the rest of information...so you practiced your patience..."*

Peter: *"But I did not write anything."*

T. Wendy: *"...so I congratulate each of you, you managed to wait until we wrote this so now we all work on it...I will bring paints to you..."*

Ida: *"Yeay!"*

T. Wendy: *"So we agree on that here we do not paint...so everyone what he/she wants to paint."*

...

T. Wendy giving paints and brushes: *"So you can start..."*

T. Wendy: *"But you know what? We will take the chairs away so you can walk around, take turns and paint."*

...

Ginny: *"We are taking the chairs away."*

Ida: *"I will make a flower."*

Edwin: *"But this is my space."*

Fanny (belligerently): *"No, we can walk around."*

...

The paper fills with pictures quickly.

Mary (cryingly): *"I did not manage to paint anything."*

Peter: *"Wait...I did not paint anything yet."*

Simon: *"You did this under."*

Fanny: *"No, no."*

Many of them expressing discomfort from not enough space, pushing a bit each other, asking for more colour, water...the frustration arises. Henry struggles with the closeness of others.

T. Wendy: *"David, let Henry there, you pushed him away, come here from this side."*

David: *"But I wanted to...paint one thing...I cannot paint now."*

T. Wendy: *"So wait...you have plenty of time."*

Fanny: *"Do not paint in my way. Edwin!"*

Katie: *"Edwin!"*

Edwin (screaming): *"Hey, why are you painting into mine?"*

Fanny (screaming even louder): *"But you are painting into mine too!"*

Owen: *"I have not painted a single thing."*

Edwin: *"But I was painting..."*

Fanny (not letting Edwin finish): *"But I was in the middle and you started painting into it."*

Children talking angrily one over another.

T. a. Nora: *"But children...children...let's find an agreement."*

Children do not hear the teacher, continue talking.

Fanny (angrily): *"You are scribbling into mine here, can you see that?"*

Edwin: *"But I was painting there first."*

Fanny: *"So what? You can see that I am painting there now."*

Fanny: *"Do not paint into it."* (towards Katie)

Edwin: *"So now you know how it is."*

Fanny (screaming): *"Do not paint into it."*

Katie (screaming): *"I do not paint into yours."*

Peter: *"But you did."*

Katie (screaming): *"I did not."*

T. Wendy: *"Fanny! Fanny! Do you know what a base of agreement is?"*

Fanny: *"But you are painting directly into this....grrrr...."*

T. a. Nora: *"Make it longer, here and you can make the flower here...he has the sun there...make the stalk longer...yes, super."*

Mary: *"Heyy, Peter, you have covered my flower."*

Fanny: *"There I should have a stalk...I was not able to paint not even one..."* (crying)

Ginny: *"And now she cries."*

Edwin: *"At least I am not crying."*

Fanny: *"But you painted more things than me."*

Simon: *"I painted just one thing."*

Katie: *"I painted two."*

...

Peter: *"David, you painted over this mine..."*

David: *"No, I did not do that."*

Peter: *"So who did it?"*

Ginny (confidently): *"Me, flowers do grow across each other, don't they?"*

Peter: *"Then you are not allowed to do..."*

T. Wendy: *"How is it, Peter in nature?"*

Ginny jumps into teacher's sentence: *"Across each other!"*

T. Wendy continues: *“Do the flowers grow one flower, 5 meters, another one or how is it in nature?”*
 Ginny: *“There is a flower and this covers the other one, exactly, the flowers are not at all neat, in the row, the nature is not even at all.”*
 T. Wendy: *“Exactly...”*
 Katie: *“Fanny, pay attention, you also paint over mine here too.”*
 Fanny (triumphantly): *“But as you know the nature is like this.”*
 ...
 Peter: *“Sorry, sorry...it was by accident.”* (He painted over Katie’s flower.)
 Katie: *“Not for me.”*
 Peter: *“It was by accident, sorry.”*

The collective agency in form of resistance or denial towards adult-led activities did not appear within the observation, children wanted to participate or comply with the rule of the preschool that they ought to participate within the time of adult initiated activities. However, Henry, a child with special needs often expressed the resistance to participate in planned activities. He loved playing freely on his own or with his best friend Alvin. Every time he did not want to participate in the activity, he called the teacher’s name and expressed, *“I do not want...want to play”*. He was quite persistent, expressing repeatedly to a teacher that he did not want to participate but at the same time, waited for the teacher’s assent. The teachers tried to positively negotiate with him, encourage him to stay for a while and do the activity or offered the solution that he could play first and come later so he could do it in his own pace and with teacher’s assistance if needed. This happened often when it was targeted to an individual work like painting, creating something. In activities like collective games, the teachers tried to negotiate with him to stay and play with others for a little while. His agency appeared there again, sometimes he complied, sometimes he expressed again the resistance and achieved his wish to go to play.

Figure 3. The invitation poster for the preschool’s garden party



9.1.4 Agency in situations of challenging the rules of the preschool and negotiating

The children seemed to be very comfortable and independent in the space of the preschool, coming to teachers only when they needed something that required reporting to the teacher that they are about to take/use it or asking for permission. Moreover, I could observe several situations that showed that children were aware of rules set and complied with them and if any of them disregarded the rule, they were able to supervise and remind each other about the rule. There were very few times they called the teacher to resolve situation as they tried but they could not come to agreement. I have observed very few disputes among children, it seemed that children respected each other and knew each other well, could support each other and were willing to find solutions. The few disputes arose mostly, when they tried to negotiate their space where they were playing or when some reminded the rule, and the others did not listen. In such situations, the children were open to explain why they crossed the rule and with the support of teachers they could negotiate and found the solution. In this way, the agency of children was manifested in crossing the rule, but also ability to explain the reason for it and stand for their decisions. Also, the teachers' approach to solve the disputes was often more in supporting the children to find the solution by themselves and facilitating the negotiation among them rather than resolving it for them. Moreover, the teachers often discussed with children the reasons behind the boundaries or rules they set so the children seemed to understand it and accept it as part of their life. In this way, the children's agency appears more in active forms such as negotiating, assertiveness, willingness to solve the problem rather than in using agentic strategies such as for instance denial, resistance or distraction. In the following episode, I would like to draw an example of such situations where Peter, Ben and Edwin elaborated that they would question the rule and go talk to the teacher.

Obs. 6: Building the medieval town

One day Peter, Ben and Edwin were playing in the sandbox building a medieval town, including me in the play by telling me what they are about to build. The sand was quite dry, so they needed to dig deep to get the wet sand. At one point, Peter stopped and uttered: "it does not work, we need water". I asked if they can get water from somewhere. He replied, "no". I replied, seeing the water barrel standing nearby, "why not taking it from the barrel?". He sighed and replied, "we are not allowed to". It awoke my interest, so I asked again: "why?". He continued: "because we were playing silly and used it a lot...and got completely wet...". Edwin added "we also need to keep water for our herb spiral". David got into the discussion as well: "but it is warm now so we could ask and if we promise that we use it only for building we could be able to take some". Peter agreed, "yes, we use just little...I am going to ask" running to the frontyard to ask the teacher. The teacher allowed it so Peter came back running with excitement and shouted, "we can, we can...but we mustn't get wet". The two jumped up and went for small buckets to get the water and continued to build the town.

Nevertheless, the situations where the agency was moving on the continuum of acceptance of the rules and disregarding them or attempts to negotiate occurred repeatedly. The situations mentioned above within the adult-initiated activity (the auditory memory game) reveals their attempts to challenge the rules and disregard them.

Following observation excerpts depict one resting time when I was asked to read a book for children meanwhile the teaching personnel had a meeting. The resting time is realised in a mobile home used solely for resting. The house is equipped with two wooden platforms on opposite sides, a stove for warming it up during cold days and a chair for a teacher is in the middle. Also, on one side of the house there is a bunk. Children have mattresses on the platforms and each of them their own pillow and sleeping bag. The side without the bunk is for children who prefer to sleep during the rest time and on the side with the bunk, there are children who just rest. Children used their collective agency towards me by disregarding the rules set for resting time in the mobile home as they knew I did not know the rules. The individual agency could be seen in Robin going up on the bunk as he was not welcomed in the pillow house, Katie voicing her attitudes towards fairness and supporting Robin and again collective agency to

advocate for disregarding the rules for this time and negotiating the new temporary rule that would be acceptable for everyone.

Obs. 7: Robin on the bunk

At one moment, Robin got up to the bunk because he did not feel comfortable in the “pillow house” that other children built from the pillows and sleeping bags on the platform. When some children noticed it, they started to tell me that they are not allowed to be up there. I asked Robin if he knew about that rule what the other children were saying. He started the preschool 2 months ago and had other mother tongue than Czech. He answered with an upset voice: “but they do not want me there” pointing to the house of pillows. Katie who did not participate in the pillow house commented towards me: “but they are not allowed to build houses from the pillows either”. After some negotiation, we came to the agreement that to have it fair, they continue resting in their built pillow house but quietly and Robin could stay on the bunk.

In the following observation from the resting time, Mary exercised her agency not only in a form of challenging the rules but also, of challenging the power relations between an adult and a child.

Obs. 8: Mary reads the story

I stopped reading at some moment as there were too much hustle and noise. I asked why it is so and if the story is not interesting for them or what the reason is. Some of them replied that they know the story already and want to read something else. Mary chose another book, I started to read it but after a short while the hustle and noise was back. I stopped and announced that this is not working and that I do not want to read anything if there is so much noise, and asked how we can solve this situation and proposed that they might need to dismantle the pillow house if they cannot keep the noise down. Mary and Katie who listened to both readings disagreed. Mary looked at me and proclaimed firmly: “I will be reading then.” The children started to laugh and waited for my reaction. I was amused as well and replied that if all other children agree, I am happy to listen, but they need to keep the noise down. Mary could not read so she pretended to read like an adult and told the story what she remembered from my previous reading, pausing sometimes to tell other children to be quiet, using the visuals in the book to come up with the plot and add different twists to the story. Children were amused and listened carefully to her, and soon other children wanted to read too.

Mary’s agency distinctly stands out but there is also agency of children in the pillow house in a form of sabotaging the listening to the reading and making noise. At the end, contrary, children’s collective agency can be seen in letting Mary read and listen to her reading.

Within the interviews, the theme of challenging the rules appeared as well. Edwin and Jacob expressed specifically rules currently set in the preschool that they would like to change.

(Edwin)

E. *“To throw things over the fence.”*

R. *“And why would you like to do that?”*

E. *“Because it’s pretty full of sticks and stuff here.”*

(Jacob)

J. *“I would like that we could bring our toys.”*

R. *“You cannot bring your toys here?”*

J. *“No, we cannot play with them.”*

R. *“Why?”*

J. *“Hmm... We cannot.”*

Moreover, within the interviews, one more example of negotiation appeared when Katie described her strategy to achieve resting outside on the stairs of the mobile home during some resting times. It could

indicate not only to her agency manifesting in negotiation, but also in using some sort of a tactic as she knew when or rather who to ask to reach the desired outcome.

(Katie)

R. "When it is warm outside, can you choose freely where to rest outside or inside?"

K. "No...probably not...but sometimes I manage to sleep on the stairs...but I cannot decide totally."

R. "What do you mean by that you manage it?"

K. "That simply, sometimes when it's nice like this, I try to sleep on the stairs and sometimes it works and sometimes it does not."

R. "So you asked, and some teachers allow it, and some won't?"

K. "Yes."

9.1.5 Agency in situations of presenting one's abilities

Throughout the observations, children quite often involved me in their play or started to talk to me. When analysing the data, I was surprised how often it occurred that children were telling me their life experience that demonstrated their agency manifesting through autonomy and independence. I depict three interactions that illustrates it. Moreover, children often expressed agency not only what they were able to do independently, but also what they are not able to do yet.

Obs. 9: I can ride horses

One morning, Peter and I were in the back of the schoolyard where trees are that children can climb on and swing on swinging ropes and a hammock. Ginny came to us and jumped on the tree. We've met for the first time, so I introduced myself and what my role is in the preschool. Ginny said OK, and right after started to tell us about her horse-riding lecture that she was on the day before.

G. "I went riding yesterday."

R. "You rode a horse yesterday and do you mean with the preschool or alone?"

G. "Alone, I go riding."

R. "You go horseback riding, wow."

P. "Yesterday wasn't preschool...yesterday wasn't how we went..."

R. "True, yesterday was swimming, wasn't it?"

P. "Yes."

G. "And where do you go horse riding?"

G. "Hmm, I don't know."

R. "Do you take the tram or the subway or the car?"

G. "By car and I ride my horse there."

R. "And every week?"

G. "What day was yesterday?"

R. "Thursday."

G. "So Thursdays."

...

G. "I ride usually on Denny but I cannot jump on him...I need to get on him from a stool."

G. "I am the smallest there...all children there are taller."

R. "Really?! And you are quite tall for your age."

G. "Yes, all taller."

...

G. "And there are huge horses and as I am so small...so I do not ride them."

R. "Ginny, and when you are on the horse, someone is leading the horse?"

G. "Yes, leading...some of us have a leading person, for example me."

Obs. 10: I can snap my fingers but I cannot whistle

We were about to have a snack after morning circle when David came to me after washing his hands and told me that he can snap his fingers: "look, I can snap my fingers...but it does not sound so much

when I have wet hands". I told him that I cannot do it very well, but I can whistle on my fingers and showed him. Edwin came and joined the conversation, telling confidently, "I cannot whistle on my fingers, I can only without them...like this", showing how he whistles, "and sometimes it happens and sometimes it does not". David replied, "I cannot do it at all." Edwin encouraged him: "Try, it might come up". We were all three trying to whistle without the fingers for a while before the snack time started.

Obs. 11: I go shopping on my own

Similarly to Ginny, Ida started to tell me what she can do on her own when she was playing in the mud kitchen. I approached the mud kitchen area when Ida and Owen were playing there. She brought me into her play by asking if I wanted a cake. I agreed and asked if she bakes with her parents at home. She replied "Yes, and once I baked even a poppyseed cake by myself". After my expression of admiration, she continued: "I also go alone to the shop...when my bigger sister does not want to...and once when my mom wanted a cream...so I went for the cream and she does not want in the spray [the whipped cream in the spray]...and I went there and bought the cream in the spray..." We both started to laugh and she continued, "but it was alright and we could spray the cream into our mouth".

As I introduced myself to children as someone who is interested in their play and came to write a book about them, how they play together, it seemed natural for them to include me in their play. It seemed to me that they approached me as somebody in between a teacher and a child, as I was obviously an adult but at the same time someone to play with. Also, as the observation excerpts from resting time showed, I was seen as adult but who did not know all the rules of the preschool. Thus, the following observation excerpt describes children's agency in daring to challenge the conventional power relation between an adult and a child. Nevertheless, I could observe that children were confident to question power relations with their teachers too, especially with teacher Wendy and teaching assistant Nora as they both approached children more as their partners and used humour to remind children e.g. to pay attention or to be considerate to others etc. The last observation excerpt in this section illustrates it.

Obs. 12: Thelma deciding for me

Me and the teaching assistant Nora were in the mobile home looking for the parents' assent documents so I could scan/take pictures of them. Thelma comes and catches my hand and pulls me out of the mobile home.

T. "Come and play."

R. "You want me to play with you? Sweetheart, I'm coming for sure, I just need to scan something here and then I come. It will be like 5 minutes...do I find you down there?"

T. "No, you are going right now."

R. "Right now? I cannot right now."

T. "Yes, you can right now."

R. "No, look, my legs are not working...they want to stay here and scan something."

Thelma laughs to me showing her that the legs cannot be moved. I started laughing too.

R. "But it is true that I can scan it later."

T. a. Nora. "Or possibly you could scan it together, what do you think?"

T. "Yes, I want to scan it with you."

R. "Perfect, let's do it together then."

Obs. 13: Mary is not disturbed by the teacher

We all gather on the logs for the morning circle, the teacher Wendy starts to welcome everyone and introduce the morning activity. Mary is having fun with Thelma and Katie, talk loudly and do not pay attention to what the teacher is saying.

T. Wendy: *"Mary, am I disturbing you?"*

Mary: *"No."*

Teacher Wendy (smilingly): *"No? I can imagine...but you are disturbing me so can I ask you to be quiet and pay attention, so you know what we are going to do? Can I?"*

Mary (giggling): *"Yes."*

T. Wendy: (funnily): *"Great, I am so relieved."*

9.2 Children's perspectives on their agency

The open-ended interviews in small focus groups were targeted mainly on the children's perspectives on their agency, how they perceived it, what attitudes they had about it and how they were able to express it. They were conducted in groups of two or three children, groups were formed naturally as the teacher called the kids to me as they played together in the morning during the free play period. Two children were interviewed individually (Fanny and Peter) as they played on their own and when asked if they want to be together or on their own, they both wanted to be interviewed separately. The interviews were placed by the table on the frontyard.

There was an interesting moment connected to the extent of awareness of children's participation in the research, when Katie and Ginny came to the interview. I started to introduce the purpose of the interview that it will end up being written in a sort of a book, Katie added "it is going to be in English and our names won't be there". I asked if she would like to have her name there and she replied: "no...because I do not like it". Another moment occurred within the interview with Fanny. She gave me the assent, she answered several questions but then at one moment of the interview, she started to whisper the answers to me. I asked if she does not want to be recorded. She nodded so I stopped the recording and asked if she wants to continue with the interview that I could write down the answers instead of audio recording or she does not want to continue with the interview at all. She replied that she does not want to be recorded, whispered couple of more answers and then started to answer aloud again.

The initial question was about, what children can do autonomously in the preschool and then the following questions arose from children's answers – if they can play according to their wishes and rules, if they can come up with a program or a project, if they do not have to participate in the teacher-initiated activity wish they so, what they can or cannot decide etc. However, there were also moments during the observations when the children involved me in their play and consequently, a natural conversation occurred that created an opportunity for me to ask about children's perspectives on their agency openly, so these are mentioned below as well.

In the following paragraphs, I introduce the themes that were identified with the analysis – "We can but we have to ask first", "Sometimes yes, sometimes no", "We play freely" and "We vote".

9.2.1 "We can but we have to ask first"

The theme of asking for permission or just reporting to teachers has appeared regularly within the small focus groups interviews. Within the observation, it was also apparent that children often asked teachers if they can do something or go play or informed them that about taking some equipment for play (e.g. a ball for playing football, gardening tools, a water can) or that they are going to the toilet or drink when they were working together in the adult-led activities. It appeared to me that it was a respected agreement between children and teachers and that children were not afraid to ask, asked frequently and teachers gave permissions equally frequently too. These excerpts from interviews illustrate the children's view on their asking or reporting to the teachers.

(Peter)

R. *"Are there any games you cannot play without asking the teacher?"*

P. *"Playing chess...chess is quite difficult, it is for 7+."*

R. *"So you cannot play it without the teacher?"*

P. *"We can play, we can ask if we can play it."*

R. *"I see and what does the teachers say?"*
P. *"Yes."*

"I ask for paints and can paint in the morning." (Cedrik)
"If I want to play with lego...they say yes." (Edwin)
"I ask and then I can play with Marly [preschool's guinea pig]." (Ben)

Further, the following situation within participant observation also depicts the theme of asking for permission.

Obs 14: We have to ask

Ginny, Peter and me, were in the backyard by the rope swing, trees and hammock area. At one moment, Ginny asked if I knew what we were going to do that day, meaning what teachers planned for morning activity. I replied that I did not know but that gave me an opportunity to ask, if the teachers always plan and decide what they do or they can also introduce the activity too or there is time they can decide something in the preschool. Both children replied instantly: "nothing". But then Peter said, "we can decide to kill our teachers...no, hahaha". I continued to ask more specifically: "Can you decide where to play and what?" Ginny replied "yes" but Peter elaborated: "no, when we have to for example ask for Marly...that we have to ask...". Ginny agreed but continued: "yes, but we can mostly play with him".

The expression of being able to 'kill teachers' amused me but theoretically, it can also be seen as exercising of Peter's agency in the way that he is confident to joke about children's power in relation to teachers. However, at the next moment, he expresses that often they are obliged to ask teachers first. It seems to depict the ambivalence of agency, on the continuum of mastery and submissions.

Within the interview with Peter, he mentioned the asking for permission when playing with a guinea pig again, so this time, I asked why they have to ask first. He was thinking for a while, but then he came up with an explanation, *"that he could be tired...or that he's just been fed...so we don't squish his tummy, so he doesn't through up or pee himself"*.

9.2.2 "Sometimes yes, sometimes no"

Another theme that appeared regularly in the interviews could be described as sort of a flow of reduction and expansion of the space for agency. The children described that there are often some restrictions from the teachers or set rules they must follow but at the same time within, they can be autonomous and do what they want or stop doing if they do not want to continue anymore. In this way, the agency in form of negotiation appeared again:

"We can sometimes stay here and sometimes go to the park." (Cedrik)
"Sometimes yes, sometimes no...for example I can choose a colour or a shape." (Simon)
"Sometimes when we're working on things in the mobile home, or when we're cutting." (Owen)

(Jacob and Cedrik discussing about the possibility to leave the adult-initiated activity)

J. *"Sometimes I don't enjoy drawing anymore."*
R. *"What can you do about it? Can you stop? Can you tell the teacher?"*
J. *"Yes...when I do not enjoy it."*
R. *"So you can say you do not enjoy it and go play instead or?"*
J. *"Sometimes yes, sometimes no..."*
C. (talking about Jacob): *"You leave, and you can finish it later."*
J. *"Yes, sometimes."*

(Ben explaining similar situation and adding his awareness that sometimes he can change his mind regarding liking and disliking some adult-led activity)

B. *"I can decide in some play, teachers can decide in something else...that they decide that we should do something, that we should draw something or that we should do some things that we ought to, or to not do what we should not."*

R. *"And when you do something like, create or draw with teachers, can you decide something there or do they say all that?"*

B. *"Well, sometimes everything that the teachers tell us and sometimes we can decide what we will do."*

R. *"And what do you enjoy, when you can do as you like or when teachers tell or both?"*

B. *"Probably both."*

...

R. *"Do you often do things here that you enjoy or some that you don't enjoy?"*

B. *"Well, sometimes those I enjoy, sometimes those I don't enjoy."*

R. *"And the ones you don't enjoy, if you really don't enjoy it, do you have to do it or what do you do?"*

B. *"I can tell the teacher that I do not want to."*

R. *"And what happened then? What the teachers say?"*

B. *"Well, sometimes I can leave and sometimes I cannot."*

R. *"And you have to continue with it or what do you do?"*

B. *"Yes, but I can then start enjoying...like that I did not enjoy first and then I started enjoying it."*

Moreover, the children's expressions indicated that the reduction and expansion of the space for children's agency is in the flow so to say in 'a constant movement' rather than a definite restriction. It can be illustrated on Peter's description of his temporary ban to go to backyard on his own that it is not 'real ban':

R. *"And what about the forbiddance for you from the teachers to not be able to go down on your own?"*

P. *"No, they did not forbid it."*

R. *"Really?"*

P. *"Yeah, they forbid me because I was climbing the fence...but it's not forbiddance."*

R. *"No? It is not forbiddance?"*

P. *"Yeah...I can go down with the teachers."*

R. *"I see so if the teacher is there you can go down or you have to ask so they know you're there."*

P. *"Yes."*

R. *"I see. You think it is not an ultimate forbiddance that they didn't forbid you to go down at all, but that you can go there but there's a condition?"*

P. *"Yeah."*

R. *"And for how long do you have it?"*

P. *"If I do not climb the fence there once more, then I can go."*

R. *"So you'll be able to go there on your own again, you mean?"*

P. *"Yeah."*

(Ginny and Katie)

R. *"What you would like to decide here about?"*

G. *"When we have lunch."*

K. *"That we have the tables outside."*

G. *"That we have horses outside."*

Within the interview with Ginny and Katie, a question about their opinions arose if they feel they could tell their proposals freely to the teachers or if they are afraid to tell the teachers. They both replied that they would say. When asked if they can think of any proposals, they promptly could give some examples:

"To have a cycling day... that we could ride all day, that's what Debbie [Katie's sister] has today."
(Katie)

"To have a dog Marty the whole day in the preschool." (Ginny)

"To have a cat and hens...or a cat or hens." (Katie)

However, it seems that it did not come to their minds that they could come up with proposals, even though it had happened recently with the Ben's proposal about publishing the books and bookstores. One of the reasons might be that the Ben's proposal and activity was rather one of the kinds when asking the teacher, the teachers do not actively open the discussion for children's proposals of activities.

(Ginny and Katie)

R. *"So when Ben came up with the idea of making books?"*

G. *"So it worked out."*

R. *"The teachers went along with it?"*

K. *"Yes, they did."*

R. *"So it was an idea that he had and then it was realised, and they [teachers] left it up to you or they decided something about it?"*

K. *"Yeah, they left it up to us."*

Other children were also able to give several suggestions and was able to reason how it will be possible to realize and maintain:

(Ben)

B. *"I would like to play with cars."*

R. *"You do not have any cars here?"*

B. *"Well, we had but we lost all of them."*

R. *"I see. So how would it be possible to solve it?"*

B. *"Hmm, I would have a plan...we have already quite lot of money from the bookstore so for half we could buy some cars and for other half something else."*

(Peter)

P. *"I'd like to...that there will be...that we have here some animals, like an aquarium."*

R. *"Like more animals than just Marly? "And fishes you mean or what animals in the aquarium?"*

P. *"Yeah, but it would be that the fishes would be all ours...so we could feed them because I know...because I already have a fish."*

R. *"You have it at home?"*

P. *"Yes and it's a fighting fish so I give her dried meat."*

R. *"I see. Do you think you would be able to take care of two animals, Marly and fish too?"*

P. *"Yeah, there are a lot of us."*

R. *"What would you have to do to manage that? Do you have any ideas of what you might need to do?"*

P. *"Yeah, I know...that somebody would...that we'd split into groups and half of us would take care of the fishes and the other half would care of Marly."*

(Richard)

"I would like to dig in the preschool a little here and a hole down there...because there is a laboratory...well, now we are building a castle there."

9.2.3 "We play freely"

Within the observation it was perceptible that children enjoyed in large extend the periods of the free play. Thus, I was interested if it reflects in the interviews, if children recognise it as free time and space and if and what value or opinions they express about it. The answers regarding free play occurred on questions what they like in the preschool that they can do autonomously. Some expressed it in the

general term that everything they can do in the free play whereas others named activities they like doing in the periods of free play.

"We have time to play freely, that we play freely." (Katie)

"I can play as I want." (Simon)

"We can play football." (Owen)

"We can decide what we will create." (Ginny)

"We build a lot, make mortar and so...we can build and make mortar." (Richard)

"We build also houses." (Owen)

"I can draw." (Cedrik)

"We can decide...hmmm...we can decide to plant trees...we are planting the trees now." (Peter)

A couple of children also acknowledged that they could move autonomously within the preschool environment, decide on their own and did not need to report it to the teacher.

"We can play where we want." (Edwin)

"When we go down." (Ginny)

9.2.4 "We vote"

Children mentioned voting mostly in connection to situations when they went out from the preschool environment, but the act of voting did not happen on regular basis. Also, it seemed that they voted only about staying in the preschool or going to the park, they did not recall that they would vote about other options suggested by children. However, when I asked Ben if he recalled who suggested the voting when they were about to decide what they buy for the money from the bookstore, he was able to recall that children "we" but did not remember the child concretely. A couple of them expressed they could propose to go to the playground sometimes, but they do not vote about it. Also, a few mentioned that they vote about other stuff like games.

(Katie)

K. *"Sometimes we vote."*

R. *"And is it good or bad, what do you think?"*

K. *"Good."*

R. *"Why?"*

K. *"Because sometimes we want to stay here, so we vote, and we stay."*

(Ben)

B. *"We have done it once."*

R. *"And did you like it?"*

B. *"I quite like it."*

R. *"And why? Why did you like it?"*

B. *"Because we could figure out if we want to stay here or go to the park."*

(Peter)

R. *"Do you vote here?"*

P. *"Yes."*

R. *"I see and do you like it or what do you think about it?"*

P. *"I like it."*

R. *"Why? Why do you like it?"*

P. *"Because like...it will be fair."*

(Edwin)

R. *"When you go for a walk, can you suggest where you go?"*

E. *"No."*

R. *"You never, you don't make any suggestions like that you would say: we would like to go to the playground."*

E. *"Yeah, that's what we say."*

R. *"You say that and what the teachers say? Okay, we can go to the playground or?"*

E. *"Yeah, sometimes, sometimes no."*

(Jacob)

R. *"Sometimes the teachers say – yes, today we can go to the playground?"*

J. *"Yes, that would work – that what they say."*

(Ginny)

R. *"What else do you vote about?"*

G. *"What we are going to play on."*

(Fanny)

R. *"And do you vote for anything else or just this?"*

F. *"I don't know or don't remember it."*

R. *"What about a game, did you ever vote about it?"*

F. *"Yes."*

10 Discussion

The findings of the study demonstrate that the children's agency is a multilayered concept that is intertwined with children's relations and the context they are situated in. Seeing the preschool as a socially constructed space with its structure, rules and power dynamics between the teachers and children, the agency appears interrelated with the structure and power relations. Moreover, as the everyday life in the preschool moves on the continuum of different events, experiences, and involvement, so does the agency move along manifesting in various actions. Thus, the findings depicted children's agency on the background of various situations such as in free play and exploration of the outdoor environment, in child-initiated activities, in adult-initiated activities and in situations when children presented their abilities. Within these contexts the agency often appeared on the continuum of assertiveness to compliance. Specifically, the agency oscillated on the continuum of compliance with the rules, challenging or negotiating them or disregarding them. Moreover, when interviewing children about their perspectives on their own agency, the theme of viewing certain space where they could navigate their agency appeared. Within the space, the agency could also move on the continuum as the space was seen in constant movement of expansion and reduction. Furthermore, the free time periods were perceived by children as valuable time when they could act most autonomously and in this way exercise their agency. In the following paragraphs I discuss these identified themes with reflection to the literature.

Surprisingly, the children's agency towards adult-led activities in the form of resistance, denial, or sabotage as the study of Wood (2014) described appeared very seldom. Children seemed to comply with the preschool rules and structure that they ought to participate in such activities. One of the reasons could be, what children expressed in the interviews, that they view a certain space for negotiation and openness on the side of teachers. In reaction to it, they expressed confidence to ask for permission to leave an activity or to negotiate with teachers. They also mentioned that they feel confident to express their feelings or opinions about introduced activities, however sometimes they do not have a choice and must at least try. I found this as a very intriguing point in the findings as the children expressed that it is not entirely their choice to participate but at the same time, they comply together with not applying the agentic actions in the way of resistance, denial etc. The acceptance or compliance can stem from the fact that these activities were short (usually maximum of 20 minutes per day) and the rest of the preschool time children spent in free play and free movement with very little adult involvement. Also, the certain space for negotiation (i.e. applying the agency) to for instance leave the activity earlier can play a role in the compliance of the activities. Similarly to Markström & Halldén's (2009) outcomes, the negotiation of children, once the teacher-led activity is not appealing to them, can be seen as the acceptance of the social order partially in the way they will participate in the activity as long as it is interesting or not lasting too long. However, in line with Payne (2012) and her elaboration of everyday agency, children may comply with adult planned activities simply by seeing it as part of their everyday life in the preschool, accepting the social structure and rules and not feeling the urgency to resist as the activities were part of their life in the preschool.

Together with complying, challenging and negotiating the rules and structure of the preschool, the challenging of power dynamics between an adult and a child occurred within the observation as well. In relation to the teachers, the agency did not appear as much in disregarding the rules as it manifested in negotiation. It was interesting to see that the challenging of the adult-child power dynamic occurred more in relation to me in situations when I was with children alone. The children did perceive me and respected me as an adult, but at the same time they were aware that I do not hold the same position as other teachers/teaching assistants within the preschool structure and that I do not know all the rules of the preschool. In this way, 'the space' set by the rules and 'guarded' by the teachers could expand when

no teacher was around and so their agency expanded in direction to disregarding the rules and negotiating a new one as the excerpt from the resting time clearly depicted. Furthermore, my specific position in between the teacher and the child created the space where the traditional power relation between an adult and a child could be reversed. As the excerpt of such situation shows (when Mary decided to read the story instead of me), the act of loosening the power relations created a space for new way of exercising the children's agency. I found this situation remarkable as it depicts the potential for enhancing children's agency once the space is widened across the borders of the structure and power relations. I wonder if this can be seen as a way to enact the agency that some scholars, curricular documents and international bodies (the OECD) call for and how it can be realised in the practice.

Regarding the inquiry of children's perspectives on their own agency, the findings indicate that although children regularly expressed their agency, the perspectives and/or awareness of their agency were rather indistinct. In many episodes, the awareness of their agency could be seen in their expressions of having capacity to act autonomously, decide, express opinions, proposals or negotiate but the space was not given to acknowledge the agency per se or reflect upon it or discuss it with teachers. Surprisingly, within the interviews, none of the children including Ben recalled and mentioned the situation when asked if they can come up with proposals or initiate an activity instead of teachers. It can lead to the conclusion that awareness of their agency or their sense of agency as several Finish studies elaborated is not fully recognised. However, looking at Caiman & Lundegård's view on agency as "engagement with particular temporal-relational-contexts for action" (2014, p. 442), it can indicate that they may not be aware of it because it occurs to them within temporal and relational contexts. Thus, when asked retrospectively children might not see the situation as in manifesting their agency as their actions evolved based on specific context and within certain relations, not as an agentic action they would apply.

Furthermore, Caiman & Lundegård's description of steps in achieving agency – anticipation, a course of action and fulfilment were visible in the findings of this study too, e.g. observation excerpts 'Letting the river flow' or 'Building the medieval town'. Similarly to Caiman & Lundegård's study, the findings also indicates that the outdoor environment and unstructured time given children to explore generate the situations, where they exercise agency naturally. Consequently, the theme of an enactment of agency come to the question in this aspect too. The findings indicates that children's agency in the preschool occurred without teachers' attempt to enact the agency. However, in several episodes, the teachers played an important role either allowing the activity to occur by giving time and space to it, providing materials or an advice when asked by children. Thus, rather than the concentration on enhancement of agency by teachers, the focus of teachers shall be on enhancement of space and time for child-initiated activities where the enhancement of agency is in hands of children and develops naturally within the context of their lives. Further, by giving space also for dialectic or reflective practices after the child-initiated activities, children can build their awareness of agency based on their abilities, finding the answers in themselves and together with others. This goes in line with studies that highlight the reflective processes, so the children have opportunities to develop their understanding of agency (Garvis, S., Ødegaard, E., & Lemon, 2015; Hilppö, Lipponen, Kumpulainen & Virlander, 2016; Robson, 2010).

Moreover, the agency manifested not only in child-initiated activities within the free play time periods, but also when the teachers 'stepped back' and gave space to children to lead and evolve the activity instead of introducing the adult-led activity. The activity, 'the publishing house and bookstore', illustrates the children's agency manifesting in autonomy, assertiveness and goal-directed action when children are given time and opportunity to realise their ideas and act on their own. It started as a single activity proposed by one child and ended as a week project with the involvement of all preschool members including parents. The teachers described that they went along with the activity as they observed children's deep interest and dedication towards creating the books and, the rich imaginative play that accompanied the creation. The 'life course' of the activity, from leading the activity, creating the books, establishing the publishing house and bookstore, selling books to teachers and parents, proposing the voting and negotiating about the spendings of the revenue portrayed the complexity of children's agency and its evolvement within the time and the relations in the preschool unit. It illustrates

in micro perspective Abebe's call to view children's agency as the continuum of changes and involvement and the interdependence of relations children are situated in. Moreover, it can be considered as an apt example of the co-agency depicted in the OECD Learning Compass for 2030 as it is described there as a process of co-creation of the teaching-and-learning process by students and teachers together, in a wider perspective together with parents and communities. The process of the publishing house and bookstore's activity was based in co-creation of learning process by both children and teachers. Equally, the children could propose ideas and steps as well as the teachers could suggest steps or deepen the learning possibilities that occurred naturally e.g. the counting and elaborating the theme of money. Furthermore, the parents were also involved as children proudly presented the publishing house and bookstore to parents and they were invited to the bookstore to purchase children's books. The children involved the teachers in the process not only by consulting with them the creation of the books or assisting with materials for it etc., but also by involving them in the negotiation and voting for the subject of spendings. Also, the fact that children decided to buy things for usage of all children in the preschool brings the element of community and the care and support towards it. Moreover, the OECD Learning Compass 2030 is predominantly targeted to school-age children, but this project designed by preschool-age children clearly indicates that the agency and co-agency can be present already in early education. It is important to state that the child-initiated activity was as one of teachers called "a nice activity", so to say that the activity itself had wide learning potential and very few perils that would e.g. challenge any rules or status-quos of the preschool a thus require teacher's interventions or directions. Nevertheless, I found the activity remarkable as it clearly illustrates the undeniable potential of preschool-aged children to be active agents in steering their learning paths.

Additionally, the findings indicate that children perceived the outdoor environment as a place where they can exercise their agency most freely and do their childhood due to the wide opportunities for free and unattended play that the outdoor environment offers. Appearing in both sources of data (observations and interviews), children seemed to highly value the free play time periods of the preschool. Also, they viewed the 'free play' as 'really free', and the outdoor environment of the preschool played a distinct role in it. It seems that the play in the preschool were viewed as 'free' as due to the large and indented outdoor environment, they could often play without teachers' supervision, directions, thus according to themselves. As being children from the city centre, the opportunities to experience unsupervised play otherwise outside of the preschool was limited for them. Moreover, the findings show that the 'free play' periods sparked rich and spontaneously occurred learning situations despite not being organised or moderated by teachers with aims to initiate the process of learning. Furthermore, the findings reveal that the less constructed nature of the outdoor environment, the possibility to play and move freely there, and be 'in a vivid interaction' with the environment strengthen the feelings of belonging among children that the preschool is not only the place children go to or that it belongs to teachers' who decide about it entirely. The Early Years framework for Australia advocates that "identity and confidence are also built when all children are offered genuine choices, time and opportunity to exercise agency, act on their own to increase autonomy, resilience and persistence, as well as interact with others with care, empathy and respect" (Belonging, Being, & Becoming, 2022, p. 30). The findings support this notion, the extensive time for 'free play' in the less constraint outdoor environment brought children many opportunities for exercising their agency freely, building their identities and beliefs in themselves. Moreover, the children played in the outdoor environment in symbiosis with the weather, fauna and flora so the nowadays very accented activities to enhance an awareness of sustainability were happening naturally with very little intervention from teachers. Yet again, it goes in line with Australian curriculum for ECEC that emphasizes, "outdoor spaces invite open-ended play and interactions...[and]...foster an appreciation of the natural world and the interdependence between people, animals, plants, lands and waters providing opportunities for children to engage with all concepts of sustainability through environmental education" (Belonging, Being & Becoming, 2022, p. 23). Similarly, Beery, Chawla & Levin (2020) when studying a development of young children's connection to nature highlight "through early experiences in nature, children may begin to feel part of the natural world before they know how to express this in words; from this beginning comes awareness that, as part of the natural world, they have a responsibility to care for nature and one another" (p. 19).

They also emphasize that the connectedness depends on having opportunities to explore nature freely, based on children's own interest and inquiry, in unorganised manners.

The findings reveal that the outdoor environment plays a specific role in exercising agency and calls for further investigation. The concept of affordances has been applied by several authors (Kernan, 2010; Kytta, 2002; Lauterbach, 2023; Waters & Maynard, 2010) when approached children's engagement with the outdoor environment. Thus, one of the further studies could concentrate on investigating children's views on the affordances of the outdoor environment and the opportunities it offers in relation to exercising their agency.

Furthermore, the studied theme, children's agency was primarily approached from the sociological perspective in this study but in all means the aim was not to dismiss the psychological views on agency. The psychological perspectives on self-regulation and self-determination in relation to agency could enrich this theme as well as perspectives from ecological psychology, for instance the theory of affordances as mentioned above in connection to outdoor environment.

11 Limitations of the study and implications for further research

In this chapter, I list several possible limitations of the study and what implications for further research they can indicate.

Initial limitations can be seen in the size of research unit and the limited time period for collecting data. Moreover, the audio recording within participant observation could be also viewed as constricted as it cannot always capture the situation and the context that can be beneficial in depicting the agency in its wholeness. However, the study has brought interesting findings despite those limitations and as it was framed as exploratory case study within the framework of master's programme, the aim was mainly to bring primal insights into the theme. Nevertheless, these limitations could imply suggestions for further research. Concretely, a prolonged period of observations and the video recording as supporting the collection of data could bring more faceted views on children's interactions and the contextual background of agency. The video recordings could be also beneficial to the peer debriefing in securing the higher validity. Furthermore, the possibility to involve children in research by video recording their interaction could bring even more layers into their agency. Also, the focus groups discussion with children upon the video recordings could enrich the data collection, especially towards the theme of children's perspectives on their own agency as the focus groups discussion indicated that it was easier for children to elaborate their perspectives, attitudes, and opinions once an example of a situation was given.

Furthermore, even though children's socio-economic background varied more than in a typical private forest preschool mainly due to the fact that the preschool was founded by municipality, limitations stemming from rather same socio-economic and cultural background of children cannot be disdained. Moreover, the preschool is placed in one of the central districts of a bigger town, thus, the children and their families came from more less the same subculture, ethnicity and similar housing and lifestyle. A typical private forest preschool in the Czech Republic is usually placed in the districts of cities that are further from city centre in the forest and gardens so often nearby residential areas with family houses rather than blocks of flats. As the status of such forest preschool is private, there is a tuition and often it also involves parents to be active in the preschool. It naturally generates group of parents with very similar socio-economic background, value system and lifestyle. Thus, interests for further research could land in comparative studies and mix-method designs studying also the correlation between children's manifestation of agency and parents' socio-economic background. The comparison of manifestation of children's agency in an indoor preschool (state or private) and forest preschool (state or private) could also be another optics to use for further research.

Lastly, as the findings indicated, the outdoor environment of forest preschool, the spaces where children can realise their play and activities without direct supervision of teachers can imply another direction for further research, concretely the relation between the outdoor environment and children's agency. As mentioned in discussion, the affordances of the outdoor environment in relation to exercising of children's agency are realms worth to be investigated further. Furthermore, preschool-aged children's agency related to perspectives on sustainability is another emerging theme.

Conclusion

The aim of this study was to explore and depict how children exercise their agency in everyday life of a forest preschool in the Czech Republic and inquire what perspectives they have on their own agency. Employing the qualitative research of participant observation and open-ended interviews, I pursued to capture the children's agency from their stances, how they live their agency in the everyday complexity of relations to one another, to adults (teachers and teaching assistants), and within the outdoor environment of the forest preschool. The study attempted to enrich the research arena with exploring agency from the perspective of children opposed to more common studies on agency from teachers' standpoints or their pedagogical approaches towards children and their agency.

The findings of the study demonstrate that the children's agency is multifaceted concept that is dynamic, oscillating on the continuum of events of everyday life. The constant flow of reduction and expansion of the space for agency due to socially constructed characteristics of the preschool brings forth different manifestation of agency in relations to teachers and among each other. The findings reveal that children exercise their agency in complying to or challenging the rules of the preschool as well as in negotiating. Also, the agency manifested greatly in child-initiated activities either within the free play time periods or when the teachers 'stepped back' and gave space to children to lead and evolve the activity.

The outdoor environment of the forest preschool and the opportunities for free and unattended play that the environment offers seem to be significant for exercising children's agency and doing their childhood. Children perceived the outdoor environment as their place where they could play freely and highly valued it. This possibility to move freely in the environment, and also play freely in and with the environment seemed to strengthen children's sense of belonging to the place and the connection to natural world.

Although the presented study was conducted only as a single case study with a rationale of an unusual case, it has brought interesting insights to children's agency in everyday life of the forest preschool. As the forest preschool environment and the realm of ECEC are rather rarely subjects of research in the Czech Republic, the conducted study dares to demonstrate that these arenas are worth of studying as it can shed lights on important themes such as children's wellbeing and the process of building their own identity and exercising agency, together with sense of belonging to the place and community and connection to nature.

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Appendices

Appendix 1 – Letter to the preschool

Appendix 2 – Informed Consent (Legal Guardian)

Appendix 3 – Informed Consent (Teacher/Teaching Assistant)

Appendix 1 – Letter to preschools

Dobrý den,

jmenuji se Eliška Kubjátová a studuji magisterský program Pedagogického výzkumu ve Švédsku a svou diplomovou práci jsem se rozhodla věnovat tématu: **Jak děti žijí svou agencí v každodenních činnostech v lesní MŠ v ČR.**

K tématu mě přivedla má vlastní pracovní zkušenost z MŠ ve Švédsku, práci s dětmi se věnuji dlouhodobě a nepřestává mě fascinovat a naplňovat. Rozhodla jsem se výzkum uskutečnit v ČR, protože mě zajímá, jak se předškolní výchova realizuje v ČR a zejména pak v lesních MŠ.

Moc ráda bych sběr dat uskutečnila u Vás, neboť jsem na Vás dostala doporučení a zaujala mě Vaše filozofie, přístup uvedený na webových stránkách.

Hned na začátku bych chtěla zdůraznit, že mým zájmem/cílem není žádné hodnocení, ani dětí, ani předškolního prostředí, ani pedagogů/průvodců. Můj výzkum je zaměřen na zmapování přístupu dětí, jejich perspektivy na svou autonomii a aktivní účast, tj. jedná se o deskriptivní výzkum (popis stavu). V příloze jsem shrnula hlavní body výzkumu, určitě mohu poskytnout více informací.

Za hlavní výzkumnou metodu jsem zvolila zúčastněné pozorování, protože bych ráda, aby sběr dat proběhl v co možná nejpřirozenějších podmínkách, kdy se výzkumník aktivně zapojí do denních aktivit a stane členem daného prostředí. Zároveň mi tato role dává příležitost Vám nabídnout sebe jako extra průvodce. Druhou výzkumnou metodou je otevřené rozhovory s dětmi.

Doba mé přítomnosti u Vás je určitě na domluvě, mohu kterýkoliv den a je možné se domluvit jak na kratší, ale intenzivnější přítomnosti nebo např. 2x týdně minimálně měsíc, v období do konce školního roku, příp. i v rámci příměstských táborů.

Ještě bych ráda poznamenala, že švédský výzkumný přístup je velmi striktní, co se týká anonymity účastníků výzkumu, tudíž veškeré sesbíraná data budou anonymizována, tak aby nebyla předškolní organizace a účastníci rozpoznatelní.

Určitě se ráda i nezávazně setkám či poskytnu víc informací k výzkumu – telefonicky, emailem.

Děkuji.

S přáním pěkného dne

Eliška Kubjátová

Appendix 2 – Informed Consent (Legal Guardian)

Informovaný souhlas s účastí ve výzkumu

Hlavní řešitelka výzkumu:

Mgr. Eliška Kubjátová, studentka mezinárodního magisterského programu v pedagogickém výzkumu na univerzitě v Göteborgu

- předchozí studium v ČR: Magisterský program Pedagogika, obor Sociální pedagogika a poradenství (Masarykova Univerzita v Brně)
- pracovní zkušenosti z MŠ ve Švédsku

Kontaktní údaje:

email:

Název výzkumného projektu v rámci magisterské diplomové práce:

Jak děti žijí svou agency v každodenních činnostech v lesní MŠ v ČR

(How children live their own agency in daily activities in a Czech forest preschool)

Cíl a smysl výzkumu:

Smyslem výzkumu:

- zjištění možností autonomního zapojení předškolních dětí do jejich vlastního učení, rozhodování a seberozvoje v rámci každodenních aktivit v MŠ

Cílem výzkumu – popis:

- jak děti v lesní MŠ provádějí/projevují/vnímají svou agency – vlastní autonomii účast/zapojení se do každodenních činností MŠ
- jak samy děti nahlíží na svou vlastní agency – autonomii a účast v každodenních situacích v MŠ

Cílem ani smyslem výzkumu není žádné hodnocení, ani dětí, ani předškolního prostředí, ani pedagogů a asistentů.

Metody a techniky výzkumu:

1. Zúčastněné pozorování – cíl: popis situace

Řešitelka výzkumu se zapojí do denního chodu MŠ v roli asistentky pedagoga; v rámci této role si bude dělat písemné poznámky z pozorování interakcí mezi dětmi a mezi dětmi a dospělými, případně bude vytvořen zvukový záznam (na základě předchozího ústního souhlasu zúčastněných dětí a pedagogů). Účastníci výzkumu – děti a pedagogové, asistenti pedagoga budou informováni, že mohou kdykoliv požádat o zastavení zvukové nahrávky nebo písemných poznámek.

2. Krátké rozhovory ve skupině dětí – cíl: zjistit perspektivu dětí na jejich agency v MŠ

Na základě souhlasu dětí s rozhovorem a zvukovým záznamem bude veden řešitelkou výzkumu krátký rozhovor na téma: Co si sám/sama ve školce můžu rozhodnout, dělat podle sebe? Do čeho se můžu ve školce zapojit? Děti budou opět informováni, že účast na skupinovém rozhovoru je dobrovolná a mohou kdykoliv rozhovor opustit.

Zpracování sesbíraných dat – písemné a zvukové záznamy:

Místo výzkumu, název MŠ a přilehlé okolí bude anonymizováno stejně jako účastníci výzkumu – děti i pedagogové, asistenti pedagoga. Osobní data kromě věku a jména dětí nebudou řešitelkou výzkumu

zjišťována. Získané zvukové nahrávky budou přepsány do písemné formy pouze pro účely analýzy k výzkumné práci. Ani zvuková, ani textová forma nebude nikde zveřejněna jako celek a veškeré citace, které budou v rámci výstupu výzkumu – diplomové práce zveřejněny, budou přeloženy do angličtiny a anonymizovány.

Doba řešení výzkumného projektu: 6.6.- 30.6.2022

Výstupy projektu: dostupné na požádání přes email:

Informace o účastníkovi výzkumu:

Jméno a příjmení dítěte:

Jméno a příjmení rodiče/zákonného zástupce dítěte:

Prohlášení

Já níže podepsaný/-á potvrzuji, že

- a) jsem se seznámil/-a s informacemi o cílech a průběhu výše popsaného výzkumu (dále též jen „výzkum“);
- b) dobrovolně souhlasím s účastí *svého dítěte* v tomto výzkumu;
- c) rozumím tomu, že se mohu kdykoli rozhodnout v účasti svého dítěte na výzkumu nepokračovat,
- d) rozumím tomu, že mohu kdykoliv požádat o odstranění již pořízených záznamů spojených s mým dítětem a odstoupit z výzkumu,
- d) jsem srozuměn s tím, že jakékoliv užití a zveřejnění anonymizovaných dat a výstupů vzešlých z výzkumu nezakládá můj nárok na jakoukoliv odměnu či náhradu.

Zároveň prohlašuji, že

- a) souhlasím se zveřejněním anonymizovaných dat a výstupů vzešlých z výzkumu v rámci uvedené diplomové práce a případně v rámci dalších odborných článků;

Výše uvedené souhlasy s prohlášením poskytují dobrovolně na dobu neurčitou až do případného odvolání. Odvolat uvedené souhlasy mohu kdykoliv oznámením na email:

V Praze dne:

Podpis:

Appendix 3 – Informed Consent (Teacher/Teaching Assistant)

Informovaný souhlas s účastí ve výzkumu

Hlavní řešitelka výzkumu:

Mgr. Eliška Kubjátová, studentka mezinárodního magisterského programu v pedagogickém výzkumu na univerzitě v Göteborgu

- předchozí studium v ČR: Magisterský program Pedagogika, obor Sociální pedagogika a poradenství (Masarykova Univerzita v Brně)
- pracovní zkušenosti z MŠ ve Švédsku

Kontaktní údaje:

email:

Název výzkumného projektu v rámci magisterské diplomové práce:

Jak děti žijí svou agency v každodenních činnostech v lesní MŠ v ČR

(How children live their own agency in daily activities in a Czech forest preschool)

Cíl a smysl výzkumu:

Smyslem výzkumu:

- zjištění možností autonomního zapojení předškolních dětí do jejich vlastního učení, rozhodování a seberozvoje v rámci každodenních aktivit v MŠ

Cílem výzkumu – popis:

- jak děti v lesní MŠ provádějí/projevují/vnímají svou agency – vlastní autonomii účast/zapojení se do každodenních činností MŠ
- jak samy děti nahlíží na svou vlastní agency – autonomii a účast v každodenních situacích v MŠ

Cílem ani smyslem výzkumu není žádné hodnocení, ani dětí, ani předškolního prostředí, ani pedagogů a asistentů.

Metody a techniky výzkumu:

1. Zúčastněné pozorování – cíl: popis situace

Řešitelka výzkumu se zapojí do denního chodu MŠ v roli asistentky pedagoga; v rámci této role si bude dělat písemné poznámky z pozorování interakcí mezi dětmi a mezi dětmi a dospělými, případně bude vytvořen zvukový záznam (na základě předchozího ústního souhlasu zúčastněných dětí a pedagogů). Účastníci výzkumu – děti a pedagogové, asistenti pedagoga budou informováni, že mohou kdykoliv požádat o zastavení zvukové nahrávky nebo písemných poznámek.

2. Krátké rozhovory ve skupině dětí – cíl: zjistit perspektivu dětí na jejich agency v MŠ

Na základě souhlasu dětí s rozhovorem a zvukovým záznamem bude veden řešitelkou výzkumu krátký rozhovor na téma: Co si sám/sama ve školce můžu rozhodnout, dělat podle sebe? Do čeho se můžu ve školce zapojit? Děti budou opět informováni, že účast na skupinovém rozhovoru je dobrovolná a mohou kdykoliv rozhovor opustit.

Zpracování sesbíraných dat – písemné a zvukové záznamy:

Místo výzkumu, název MŠ a přilehlé okolí bude anonymizováno stejně jako účastníci výzkumu – děti i pedagogové, asistenti pedagoga. Osobní data kromě věku a jména dětí nebudou řešitelkou výzkumu zjišťována. Získané zvukové nahrávky budou přepsány do písemné formy pouze pro účely analýzy k výzkumné práci. Ani zvuková, ani textová forma nebude nikde zveřejněna jako celek a veškeré citace, které budou v rámci výstupu výzkumu – diplomové práce zveřejněny, budou přeloženy do angličtiny a anonymizovány.

Doba řešení výzkumného projektu: 6.6.- 30.6.2022

Výstupy projektu: dostupné na požádání přes email:

Informace o účastníkovi výzkumu:

Jméno a příjmení pedagoga/asistenta pedagoga:

Prohlášení

Já níže podepsaný/-á potvrzuji, že

- a) jsem se seznámil/-a s informacemi o cílech a průběhu výše popsaného výzkumu (dále též jen „výzkum“);
- b) dobrovolně souhlasím s účastí v tomto výzkumu;
- c) rozumím tomu, že se mohu kdykoli rozhodnout v účasti na výzkumu nepokračovat,
- d) rozumím tomu, že mohu kdykoliv požádat o odstranění již pořízených záznamů spojených s mou osobou a odstoupit z výzkumu,
- d) jsem srozuměn s tím, že jakékoliv užití a zveřejnění anonymizovaných dat a výstupů vzešlých z výzkumu nezakládá můj nárok na jakoukoliv odměnu či náhradu.

Zároveň prohlašuji, že

- a) souhlasím se zveřejněním anonymizovaných dat a výstupů vzešlých z výzkumu v rámci uvedené diplomové práce a případně v rámci dalších odborných článků;

Výše uvedené souhlasy s prohlášením poskytují dobrovolně na dobu neurčitou až do případného odvolání. Odvolat uvedené souhlasy mohu kdykoliv oznámením na email:

V Praze dne:

Podpis: