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# *Ghosts, Bodyguards and Fighting Fillies: Manifestations of Pupil Agency in Play Pedagogy*

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***Abstract.*** *The aim of this article is to discuss the concept of agency in relation to learning in school. Recent educational research shows that the methods of mainstream education easily fail to support children's motivation, engagement, self-development and problem-solving abilities in classroom work (i.e., Engeström, 1991; McNeil, 1999; Sarason, 1996; Zuckerman, 2003). In this article the problem is conceptualized as a lack of pupil agency. Special focus is given to narrative-based methods such as the use of play, drama and stories in the classroom. Three different empirical examples of pupil participation in a narrative classroom activity are introduced through which the challenges and possibilities for pupil agency can be illustrated.*

***Keywords:*** *Agency, narrative learning, school, cultural-historical theory, participation*

## Introduction: Agency and Its Relation to Learning in School

Agency has become a hot topic in social sciences and in recent educational literature. Our educational institutions have been (already long) criticized for not supporting their pupils to grow into critical, creative citizens able to contribute to the development of a democratic society. Although the ability for agency can be seen a basic element of being human, creativity and critical thinking are still considered abilities of a rare elite (Giroux, 1983; Holzkamp, 1992; Zuckerman, 2003). In addition, today's schools suffer increasing motivational and behavioral problems, and both teachers and pupils often feel bored and frustrated. The contents of learning, the curriculum, different learning methods, classroom order and the use of time and materials are typically al-

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ready set beforehand by administrators and pedagogical authorities; the teachers and pupils' role is to realize and follow these plans. That is to say: pupils (and to some degree teachers) lack ownership of their own learning (and teaching) in school. Instead, children need to be seen as subjects with a voice, capable of acting, choosing and thinking over their own life circumstances (Pollard, Thiessen, & Filer, 1997; Sarason, 1996).

However, although there is much critique of the absence of agency in school learning, it is not always clear what is meant by the concept and how it can be recognized and supported in the daily activities of school. In this article I refer to agency as the "individual or collective subject's possibility and willingness to impact (and eventually transform) the activity in the realisation of which it is engaged" (cf. Hofmann & Rainio, 2006). Jerome Bruner (1996, p. 35) sees an understanding and a sense of oneself as an agent as a central requirement for selfhood: "that one can initiate and carry out activities on one's own." Another part is what Per Linell (1998, p. 271) calls a capability to "assign meaning to situations, events, behaviours and actions," and Pentti Hakkarainen (2006) as a "sense-making activity." To conclude, agency can be seen both as a *prerequisite for* and as an *outcome of* meaningful, engaged and motivated learning. According to the cultural-historical tradition (based on the work of L. S. Vygotsky and his colleagues in Russia in the 20th century), the most important achievement of school should be the development of the subject of learning, that is, the subject should be able "to set learning tasks independently, analyze the foundations of one's actions and of the actions of others (including the teacher), learn from one's mistakes, sense the boundary between the known and the unknown" (in Kudriavtsev & Urazalieva, 2006, p. 46).

In this article I discuss the possibility of and the ways through which agency manifests in a specific activity in school, namely narrative learning and play pedagogy (Hakkarainen, 2004; Lindqvist, 1995, 2002). I will illustrate this process with three empirical cases of children's ways of relating to the activity of narrative play pedagogy.

## Manifestations of Agency in Narrative Play Pedagogy

The case study that this article is based on was conducted in a Finnish mixed-age (four to eight years) elementary school class in a small town in Southern Finland. The class has developed its own set of daily activities that apply the ideas of play pedagogy and narrative learning (Hakkarainen, 2004, 2006) based on the cultural-historical theories of children's play and its role in development (El'konin, 2005; Vygotsky, 1978, 2004). Instead of focusing on the traditional goals of school learning such as formal skills and knowledge, narrative play pedagogy emphasizes the sense-making process and construction of motivation through narrative elements related to the topics close to children's interests and lives. Narratives and stories are used to build up problem-solving situations that the children and teachers together face and dramatize. Such

narrative forms of learning in which there is a problem or a contradictory situation that cannot be overcome in ordinary, familiar ways are powerful in creating emotional attitudes and the desire to solve situations.

One of the central methods for the group is a playworld, originally developed by Swedish play pedagogue Gunilla Lindqvist (1995). She was concerned that although play is considered important for children's development and learning, adults rarely know how to support it in pedagogical settings. In a playworld, pupils and teachers explore different topics and phenomena through taking on the roles of characters from a story or a piece of literature and acting inside the frames of an improvised plot. These topics are integrated into "lived-through" (Hakkarainen, 2006) experiences and problem-solving situations faced by the characters within the narrative plot. In addition to the playworld method, the teachers also encourage the children to write, direct and play out their own little plays and puppet shows.

There is special potential in play-drama for the emergence of agency. Play develops imagination, creativity and the ability to see things not directly visible in real life (Holland, Lachicotte Jr., Skinner, & Cain, 1988, p. 236; Vygotsky, 2004). And because of its improvisational nature, playing, like art and theater, works as a way to build different worlds and alternative visions. Drama and playfulness have always been a source for agency in human history, enabling people to "overcome the constraints of their daily utilitarian existence and establish a *reserve fund of capabilities* for which there was no immediate need but that might prove useful in solving new and more complex practical tasks in the future" (Kudriavtsev & Urazalieva, 2006, p. 51).

In this article I introduce three different paths of individual pupils' participation and sense-making processes to the narrative activities of the class. In all of them, I claim that important elements of pupil agency are involved and developed. However, the cases also show that the phenomenon of pupil agency in the classroom is a complex, multi-sided and contradictory process of interpersonal interaction.

### *The Case of a Bodyguard*

Anton [1] was usually considered to be "a problem kid" in the class. The teachers told me that they found it challenging to motivate Anton to do the school tasks. Simultaneously, Anton was also considered smart and inventive in what he did. In addition, he was the leader figure for a group of boys who carried out their own small pranks and other "pedagogically disturbing" acts in the classroom. In the spring term of 2004, the teachers implemented a specific narrative playworld activity "The Brothers Lionheart" based on a famous children's book by Astrid Lindgren (1988). The objectives were to enhance collaboration, to motivate uninterested pupils like Anton, and to encourage less visible pupils to take active roles in the classroom (P. Rainio, 2005). Inspired by the original story, the class made a dramatized journey acting as villagers from Cherry Valley on their way to rescue the neighboring Wild Rose Valley from

the hands of the evil Tengil. The children and teachers participated in this activity every Wednesday and Thursday morning for three months, changing their classroom into the world of the story.

From the beginning of the playworld, Anton was interested in participating and solving problems with others, but he also questioned and tested the activity and kept his distance from it. He was very creatively resistant in his use of the narrative meta-level as a powerful resource to make him heard and voiced. For example, in one playworld episode the whole class, that is, all the villagers from Cherry Valley, were invited to a place called Golden Cockerel Inn. The teacher, who was speaking in character, suggested that there they could start to plan a trip to Wild Rose Valley together. Anton and another boy Joel confused and messed up the common play by acting drunk (conduct that is inappropriate at school, although actually quite typical in an inn!). Anton and Joel managed at least momentarily to lead the situation in their own direction by skillfully using the narrative as a tool (a detailed version of this analysis is in A. P. Rainio, 2006).

The playworld seemed to be, for pupils like Anton and Joel, a chance to try out their "action potential" (Hakkarainen, 2006) and to rehearse the idea of oneself as an agentive subject through testing and questioning. For example, Anton, in other instances like this, tested and questioned not only the limits of the activity but also the other players, especially those in power, both in and out of the playworld frame. Here we can find a manifestation of agency as resistance. Kudriavtsev and Urazalieva (2006, pp. 51-52) speak of specific kinds of play activities of children that aim at the *problematization* of given images and models of adulthood and of *social experimentation* in which the child 'tries out' various forms of behavior on adults or peers in a search for the most acceptable variants thereof. Schutz (2004, p. 17) calls this "the creativity of student resistance." However, although Anton's actions both manifest agency and make sense when interpreted in this light, they also cause problems, not only to him, but also to the whole group.

Thus, it turned out that by resisting, Anton was agentive in a relatively limited way. He received the teachers' attention; however, what also happened was that he started to become excluded. From the teachers' perspective he willingly spoiled the game and a shared fictive world that the teachers were trying to keep alive and into which many of the children were also willing to belong (A. P. Rainio, 2006). What is often forgotten in the critical discourses of postmodernist analyses of classroom interaction is that pupils can also be manipulative, take control and make the whole classroom follow their rules. Anton's case presents well the dilemma of classroom interaction in which teachers often find themselves: balancing between the use of authority and control and allowing children to explore and test their limits and find their own ways of working together (Bruner, 1996; McNeil, 1999).

However, what is interesting in Anton's case is that through several turns of events in the playworld, his relation to the activity gradually changed. One

playworld episode turned out to be particularly important. Anton acquired the role of the bodyguard in the story. What was crucial was that the teachers started to listen to Anton in different way. Slowly his initiatives began to be directed, not only to making himself heard and voiced, but also towards something that he now *shared* with others: he was constructing the playworld, suggesting ideas, and supporting others' actions (A. P. Rainio, 2006). This I interpret as an *expansion of his agency* in this particular playworld activity. However, what was changing was not only Anton as an individual person, but the mutual relations between Anton and his teachers and other children. The unit of development was thus, not Anton as such, but the "joint action" (cf. Kudriavtsev & Urazalieva, 2006) between Anton, his teachers and his peers in the classroom. However, as will be illustrated with the next two cases, resistance and questioning are not the only means for creating personal sense and receiving agency in the classroom.

### *The Case of the Fighting Filly*

Helen, Sara and Ronja are a group of seven-year-old girls. They often spend their time together, playing during breaks and working together as a group on school tasks. In the narrative activity of the class (the Brothers Lionheart playworld) they have chosen the characters of horses. The girls were motivated and eager to be involved in the common adventure of the class; however, their actions did not have a great impact on the emerging playworld plot. As the spring progressed some girls and especially Helen started to ask why the boys get to do everything that is exciting and fun in the playworld, whereas the girls do not get to do anything. Helen was very determined in her opinion, and some other girls supported her in this. It is true that in the Brothers Lionheart many boys have central roles. The teachers and I started to plan a turn of events through which the girls' characters would play a more central role. On one playworld morning, all the girls of the class were together outside with a teacher when they unexpectedly happened upon the dangerous dragon Katla, who was roaring aggressively at them (the dragon is two meters long and made of paper, and the sound comes from a recorder the teachers have put inside of it). The girls were frightened at first, but then they collectively attacked the dragon and with the teacher unleashed their energy to fight this huge animal. The girls were obviously surprised at this sudden and so physical, destructive force wielded by them as a group (which is not typically allowed at school). They managed to win the battle, and for the playworld this was an important act since the dragon was the main obstacle preventing the group for making their way to Wild Rose Valley. Later many of the girls returned to this episode to talk about it, about their collective force and about how fun it was.

Except for this "empowering" move first initiated by Helen, it is hard to say whether these three girls really got a chance to enact agency in the playworld activity - or whether they even wanted that (they are more or less in the background). In any case, like many other pupils, they too seem to enjoy the play-

world very much in general. In order to learn more, I started hanging out with them occasionally during breaks. What I then noticed is that the girls have a wild imaginative world built around the topic of horses. Later in the spring I interviewed the children, and spoke also with Helen and Sara (Ronja was absent that day). It is clear that they often spend time in this world and that they have several characters, mostly horses that they also bring into the playworld activity. Sara listed some of her own roles: "Happi (=Oxygen), Volur, Tomppa, Zadi and Varsa (=Filly)." Sara and Helen described their roles in the playworld to me in the following way:

> *The nicest thing is when [the playworld] starts, because you never know what's going to happen. Like when Ingvar [a teacher in character] suddenly entered the classroom. I have played [my role] filly at home, too. I've become braver, since at the beginning the filly was fighting in the background of Ronja and Helen, but now it has had the courage to go first. (Sara, May 21, 2004)*

> *I've learned to fence. And I got to be a dog and to take care of the horse and the owner, and to watch that nobody - the burglars – come. And I help. The best thing was that I was a dog, I was helping. It was boring that boys and Hubert always got to do everything first. The only thing that girls got to do was killing Katla. Although girls are equally brave! (Helen, May 21, 2004)*

Helen also writes in her school diary:

> *3rd March 2004: In the middle of the morning circle some Rosevalleyans came. A dove was shot. Here began the Rosevalley play. I was a dog and warmed up at the make-believe fire, I ate fish. Ronja was a dog owner. I also ate vegetables. Some Tengilmen arrived at Rosevalley. In the night we all gathered by the campfire, chatting and grilling fish.*

What strikes me is the richness of their world and the fact that an outsider cannot easily see it, although it is taking place alongside the visible playworld activity. Only Helen, Sara and Ronja know about this imaginative world and the development of their characters in it. It is not knowledge shared with others. For Sara, acting Filly is also a personal experience of agency, as she tells how the filly grows braver along the way. Definitely, this ability to imagine and vision is an important dimension of agency: "Play is also the medium of mastery, indeed of creation, of ourselves as human actors. Without the capacity to formulate other social scenes in imagination there can be little force to a sense of self, little agency...Through play our fancied selves become material" (Holland et al., 1988, p. 236).

Sharing this world only with each other and keeping it secret can be interpreted as a matter of personal choice, or what can be called 'ownership.' Hofmann (2006), however, reminds us that the traditional idea of pupil owner-

ship as personal autonomy and the expression of freedom and interest is insufficient. Instead, she claims, it has to be "grounded in a notion of agency, a possibility for personally significant agentic action within and/or with regard to a broader collective activity" (Hofmann, 2006). And indeed, even though it is clear that (like many other pupils in this class) the girls, by participating in the collective activity of the narrative playworld, *make it possible and thus produce* it. This mainly enables agency for those *already in central positions* (compare Hofmann, 2006; Smith, 1987). The girls are however conscious of their capacity for agency although they feel that it is not taken seriously: "*The only thing that girls got to do was killing Katla. Although girls are equally brave!"* Verbalizing this to the teachers finally had an impact on the emerging plot of the playworld activity. In this sense, the girls act out agency.

***The Case of the Ghost***

Mikael is a seven-year-old-boy. He started first grade in the class this autumn. He is a lively boy who gets along well with the other kids. He can both read and write perfectly well for his age, but his distinctive feature at the time of starting school was that he did not speak aloud to anybody, except for his parents at home. His earlier teachers in preschool as well as his speech therapist had been unable to help him. Based on my observations, he made eye contact with other children but not with adults, he smiled and laughed a lot, although silently, and used non-verbal means of communication. The children had no problem with it; they mainly considered him shy. In the morning circle where everyone greets each other, the children would take it for granted that Mikael would not say a word. Still, he was greeted as cheerfully as the others. The teachers also talked to him normally, but they tried not to force him to express himself verbally.

During the year I spent in the school, a huge change took place in Mikael's behavior. When I finished my fieldwork in May 2004, he was a relatively talkative pupil of whom it would be impossible to know that he had had a period of over three years in which he had not made contact with adults. Here is my field note about Mikael from September 2003. At this point he had been in the class around a month:

> *The children enjoyed the theater corner's puppet show "Night Sorties." In it animals made a trip to the forest, got lost in it and were frightened by a ghost, and finally they ran home. The theater corner included three girls and Mikael from the first grade. Sari (a teacher) directed the corner. Mikael acted the role of the ghost. For Mikael this was exciting: first he spoke to himself (playing with the puppet): "This is slide, and here this slides down." When Sari tried to involve Mikael in planning the puppet show with the others, he finally participated, and even spoke, although mainly to the kids when Sari was not around. He didn't make eye contact. In the show then it was great that Mikael hollered like a ghost. The way that the other animals reacted to it made the audience (the other children) laugh, they also found it hilarious when the*

> *ghost, e.g., knocked down the lego house by accident. (AR, fieldnotes September 3, 2003)*

Mikael had an integral part in the puppet show. In the role of the ghost he only needed to holler. This was the first time he "spoke" in public in the class. He was safe behind the desk, only moving the puppet. The other puppets played by the girls were interacting with the ghost, the ghost made them scared and this made the class laugh. The children said that they liked the play. One pupil also said that she was happy about how Mikael was now brave enough to talk. Slowly within the next weeks, Mikael started to use more words, often mainly to other children, but sometimes to adults too. Later in the spring term 2004, the class had a period of studying drama. The first graders enacted a play for the others, written in cooperation with their teacher. Mikael wanted to be the "kind monster," which was the main character of the play. This is how the teacher described to me her feelings when she remembered the spring:

> *The monster was the main role, but in the beginning he did not have any lines, he just yelled. Gradually there were more words. The spoken part of the role was left to a minimun, but even the realization of this would be a real victory for Mikael. I was certain that he would chicken out, but no…Next we presented the show to Lauri's sixth grade and everything went right again. Gee, how happy I was. What a victory!!! (from an e-mail discussion on February 2, 2007)*

The case is very similarly presented in Tuomi-Gröhn's article (in this same issue) about a puppet show initiated by a teacher-student in kindergarten. However, instead of being merely a question of the growth of self-confidence of this individual child, as interpreted by the teacher-student, it is a question of agency, and more interestingly, a question of not only of individual, but of collective activity. *Verbal* interaction is the required way of communicating in a typical classroom situation (Mercer, 1995). Mikael's case shows strikingly how *his* inability to participate verbally can however be seen as much a problem of the *activity* and its limitations (the typical classroom setting) as it is his personal limitation. The narrative setting and the role of a ghost made it possible for Mikael to receive a potentially agentic position despite his "inability" to speak in public. However, the agency must not be understood in individual terms only: it must be reciprocally supported by other children (the reciprocality of collective agency is further developed in Hofmann & Rainio, 2006). As Jack Martin (2004) puts it, agency must be seen both as an emergent capacity of the developing person as well as a characteristic of interpersonal interaction. In Mikael's case, this support comes from the girls playing the puppets, the teachers letting him act in his own way, and rest of the pupils accepting him and taking what he "offers."

Finally, the case of Mikael addresses well the challenge of recognizing and analyzing pupil agency in the classroom. For as much as it is important to pay

attention to the micro-interaction and power relations of classroom situations, to the processes through which subject positions are created, it is similarly relevant to grasp the *continuity* of these positions, that is, to capture the developmental side of agency. In Mikael's case, for example, he is not only acquiring a position through which to engage, but through these positions, he is slowly able to change himself and develop during the year. He slowly overcomes his muteness with the mediating help of the characters he plays. In this way, narrative learning settings can actually be said to work in the Zone of Proximal Development (Vygotsky, 1978) of children's agency and subject development.

## Closing Remarks

All the illustrated examples highlight different ways of relating to the collective activity of the classroom, of the ways through which meaning and personal sense are assigned and constructed, and of the struggling for voice, for being heard, listened to and recognized as an active participant. Narrative, play and drama unite these cases. The purpose of this paper has been to sketch the scope of pupil agency and to discuss the ways through which it manifests in the empirical reality of classroom interaction. The next task is to systematically analyze the dynamics and development of agency as illustrated in the above cases. To conclude, I take up what I see as the main challenges that the cases above raise of recognizing, analyzing and promoting pupil agency in classrooms.

First, classrooms inevitably contain a variety of voices and a variety of needs, interests and experiences. If we are to take pupil agency seriously we cannot close our eyes to this. Some pupils enjoy staying in the background, creating their own private ways of making meaning, whereas others immediately find their way to central positions and become active and visible. All of these can be ways of acting agentically, if recognized as such. The opportunity for a subject position is not, however, only a matter of personal choice and freedom. As is well known from many critical educational studies (i.e., Gordon, Holland, & Lahelma, 2000; Popkewitz, 1998), there are several political, cultural and gender-related factors involved. The struggle for agency is thus necessarily a question of power. How is it possible then that all these ways of being and becoming fit in? Here the teacher's role as a mediator between the collective activity and an individual pupil's way of relating to it requires more attention.

Second, in order to catch the multiple manifestations of pupil agency empirically, the activity and interaction must be analyzed on two levels simultaneously. That is, (a) on the level of micro-interaction where the social reality is situationally constructed and (b) on the developmental level to grasp the continuity and development of these situational manifestations of agency. As can be seen in each of the three cases shortly presented above, without considering these two levels it would be impossible to grasp pupil agency as a dynamic and changing process, related to the activity as much as to the person. There is then a need to develop empirical tools, the so-called "middle-level" analytical

concepts (P. Rainio, 2003; Virkkunen, Engeström, Helle, Pihlaja, & Poikela, 1997).

In my earlier analyses, the concept of *initiative* (applied from Per Linell's dialogic approach from 1998, see A. P. Rainio, 2006) has proved useful for grasping agentic pupil actions on the micro-level. The focus has been on the nature and forms of these initiatives (whether they are constructing or deconstructing the activity; compare Anton's case above) and the way in which they are made (considering both verbal and non-verbal means and the tools used). It is also important to examine how they are received: whether they are accepted, developed further, or rejected. What kind of participation paths are developed from these initiatives, and what are the *critical turning points* through which the participation path develops (A. P. Rainio, 2006)?

It is also critical to analyze how the chain of (narrative, fictional) events are constructed in the classroom in the cooperation between the teacher and the pupils so that they become meaningful and sensible for the students. Finally, what is even lacking from my own analyses on the topic is that the pupils themselves should be seen in a more active role already in the research phase. They are, finally, the experts in guiding the researcher in the analysis of the empirical data in the classroom (see more of this, Hofmann, 2006).

> [W]e can define the individual subject in terms of his unique contribution to an aggregate (D. B. Elkonin), integral activity, in terms of the degree of participation by child and adult in its "design", construction, and development. And this is a basic criterion of self-development of the child as an individual subject. (Kudriavtsev & Urazalieva, 2006, p. 31)

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## Notes

1. All real names of the pupils and teachers have been changed. The original analysis of Anton's case is presented in Rainio, A. P. (2006).

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