**[Catharine Hydon]:** There's a definition thing that I think we need to do first, to say, what is this idea of children's agency? As you probably are aware, and the many people who are joining us, we know that it's part of the lexicon. It's very much part of the lexicon in early childhood education. For example, you hear it sometimes in the dialogue in community life. But I think there might be some uncertainty about what it means. Does it mean that children can do whatever they want? Is that what it means? Or is there a simple definition that you can help guide us with? So, let's start there. Caroline over to you, what is it?

**[Dr Caroline Scott]:** Sounds good. So look, the impetus for me to do my PhD on agency. So well, firstly, welcome and thank you everyone who's here. It's really exciting for me to talk about agency. And that's why I did this, because I'm going to try really hard to contain all the things I want to say. But um, so this idea that agency is not well, or is still not well understood throughout the sector. It was introduced with the EYLF, it's in the VEYLDF, children are seen as agentic, they have agency. But what does that actually mean? It wasn't very clear and what role the educator has in that was not very clear. So that was, that was the impetus the made me do that for my PhD. And so through quite a few years, and some wonderful participants with their input and their data, and also the literature, I came up with,

we won't call it a definition because agency is ever changing, it's a social construction. So it means that it could look different for different children, different at different times of the year around the world. So I came up with what's an increased theorisation. Or an increased understanding of agency. Hopefully that then guides people's understanding, can guide their practice, um, and help them understand it better, without actually boxing it up and saying this is the definition and it will be forever. So, do we want to put that slide up now?

**[Catharine Hydon]:** That would be good.

**[Dr Caroline Scott]:** Stephanie can we put that theorisation slide up now please? Just got a slide as well so that it's written, but this was the culmination of, of a lot of data and reading and thinking. And it has some key points that we will try and unpack tonight. And so, children's agency, children acting with initiative to pursue their valued outcomes, with consideration of others. So that little bit there answers really beautifully that idea, well is agency just you know, children doing what they want, when they want? Ah, children's ability to enact their agency is dependent on educator practice. So that's a really key thing as well. Educators facilitate children's agency in early childhood education and care settings by prioritising children's agency and engaging in practices which enable children to experience freedom and to exercise their power, appropriate to their abilities. So there's lots in there and we're going to unpack some of those key things today that, that's, you know, that's the deeper understanding that came out of the PhD.

**[Catharine Hydon]:** And while we are we just talking about definitions, what's the problem with just sort of boxing it up and saying, 'right there, we go there, it is done. That's what it is'. What's the problem with that?

**[Dr Caroline Scott]:** Um, ok. So I like I said, in terms of the social construction, this idea, if we think of some of these other things that are social contract constructions, like gender and quality, so everybody brings their own understandings to things. And I found that my participants had all come to their understanding of agency from different places, and through different experiences. It was also very clear that each child's agency looked different. So, children pursuing their valued outcomes. So, what it is that makes them tick, what it is that they want to do in that moment, then, you know, that sort of encompasses any outcome, depending, you know, originating from the child.

**[Catharine Hydon]:** It makes it, it makes it bigger if you like. In some ways, I think oh, gosh. It's a bit uncontainable. But in some ways, it actually gives you permission to think a little bit more broadly. Is that what you're trying to do?

**[Dr Caroline Scott]:** Yeah, absolutely. So, I, it's funny you should say that, because I felt like with the PhD, I kind of refined it, but then I also broadened it. So there is this sense that we captured these key ideas, that are really quite central to agency. But at the same time, we've said, well, if you do these few things, and you make sure you're engaging with children this way, then agency is going to, going to happen.

**[Catharine Hydon]:** Yeah. And while we are in this definition space, I think there are just a couple of other things I want to clarify. Um, you know, I get to visit a number of early childhood education and care services, not really in Covid, but hopefully, I'll be once again talking to educators. And indeed there may well be opportunities for the voice of children to be recognised in different forums in community life, and schools and a whole range of different places. But can you make a link for us, or just help us clarify, is children's voice, I might hear, I see something called 'children's voice', is that the same as agency? Or are we talking about 2 different things?

**[Dr Caroline Scott]:** Yeah, so there's definitely similarities. So part of agency is children voicing that agency, voicing what it is that they want, voicing what it is that, that is meaningful for them. But if we don't listen to that and act on that, then you know, there's not really any point. So children are born with this ability. I had this beautiful quote from one of my participants, which was, which was based on the original definition of agency that was in the EYLF, and the VEYLDF. But then I do acknowledge, that the VEYLDF deepened that understanding in the revised VEYLDF. Um children making decisions and choices and of course, or choices and decisions, and that's the definition that a lot of people are very familiar with. And my participant said, 'well all children can make choices and decisions, it's whether we allow them to'. And I thought that hit the nail on the head really beautifully around what the educators role is. So the child will voice things, they will enact their agency, there is no doubt about that. They will come out of the womb enacting their agency and making their stamp on the world. But the environment that we create around them will either stifle that or allow that to really flourish.

**[Catharine Hydon]:** And I think there's probably a lot of people who are listening online and watching us today, who have got examples of children who have been very much empowered, or enabled to exercise that sense of agency. Uh, and others, other people may have worked with children, and that might not have been the case. So I think it's an interesting, that it's such a relational idea. It's not just something that you get and you have yourself. It's a quite relational, quite connected to other people.

**[Dr Caroline Scott]:** Yeah, actually that really came out of the research. That, um, uh, I wish I had it written here.

**[Catharine Hydon]:** You mean don’t have every single thing that's written in your PhD?

**[Dr Caroline Scott]:** No! The quote, there was a quote from the research that was around the interaction between educators and children, or teachers and children. I think it was primary. The interactions are the site for the enactment of agency. And I thought that captured it really beautifully, because it really depends on what is said, and what is allowed and what is enabled, for that agency to, to flourish.

**[Catharine Hydon]:** But I wonder whether now, Caroline, you can take us into the space, and it's something that I've been pondering a bit, and I think I hear it a bit in some of our again conversations, is the relationship between agency and rights. Is, ah you know, is the term agency in the right, you know the Convention on the Rights of the Child. What do we understand? Is there a direct connection? Can you talk a little bit about that?

**[Dr Caroline Scott]:** Yeah, yeah I can, that's something that I actually want to investigate more. Um, not just rights, but participation. So the connection between those three concepts really interests me. But what I will say is, like I said before about children being born with this sense of agency. Not sense of, I don't like ‘sense of’, with agency. You know no matter really what happens, they will attempt to assert their autonomy and make decisions dah dah dah, and of course whatever goes on around them is whether that flourishes or not. But in terms of rights, children aren't necessarily born with rights. That's very much dependent on what's happening around them. So, I, I saw that kind of distinction in that, that the, the ability for children to be granted rights, um, and for those rights to be realised, are heavily dependent on what goes on around them. Um, and, you know, so is agency. So there's a similarity there as well. But, what was I going to say? Oh, now I've forgotten, I've got side-tracked.

**[Catharine Hydon]:**That's ok! So much stuff, so much theorising going on. But I think sometimes if you think, and maybe this is a trap, you know, that you think, children have got rights, so therefore they've got it, therefore I don't have to do anything. It's sort of, its more of a passive thing.

**[Dr Caroline Scott]:** Yep, exactly.

**[Catharine Hydon]:** Whereas, you know, the rights, the rights conversation has something to do with the duty bearer. I feel like, in that sort of language, is to say, if I'm a duty bearer, you know, I have a duty towards children in terms of their rights. You know, is there sort of a more deliberate process going on?

**[Dr Caroline Scott]:** Definitely. There are really intentional interactions that need to happen with children. Intentional everyday interactions, intentional planning, intentional practice that ensures that at all times you're asking these questions around, you know, are the child's rights upheld? What does this mean? Is the child able to exercise it and enact their agency through this? So, a point of reflection, um, and in terms of, I did have something else to say about the rights, give me one sec.

**[Catharine Hydon]:** You can come back to it Caroline, there will be lots of opportunity.

**[Dr Caroline Scott]:** Yeah, I'll come back to that, I'll come back to that. But the relationship between agency and rights, that's what I was going to say. So both of those things in terms of what they mean for children, came around the same time. So, this understanding of children having rights and children having agency, sort of, developed in parallel based in you know, thinking of children as competent and capable. But there are certainly some differences there that I want to explore actually in further research.

**[Catharine Hydon]:** Because, of course, we have article 12, which is about, you know, children being consulted in matters that affect them. But, yeah, that seems like a right not necessarily agency. So it's the agency what happens when you when you're part of that.

**[Dr Caroline Scott]:** Sure, yeah, yeah, absolutely. Well, this, you know, children are born with this ability to well, to choose things to, to pursue. So if we think of agency, when we're an adult, if we're able to enact it. We will be making quite big decisions around whether we have a family, or what sort of study we might do, or whether we're going to have a, big, big life decisions. Now obviously, when you're under five, you're not making those massive life decisions. But what you, what they are doing, is making really small, everyday decisions. And agency is inherent in those. Um, they might not voice it, they might not say well I'm going to go and do that because.

**[Catharine Hydon]:** Because I have agency.

**[Dr Caroline Scott]:** Yeah. Yeah. Yeah. So tapping into those tiny little everyday decisions that children make, um, is, is upholding and allowing them to enact their agency.

**[Catharine Hydon]:** And I guess knowing what it feels like to make a decision, and also potentially live with the consequences. You know, you choose, you choose to have a banana, and then when you go back to make another choice and want banana, there's no bananas left and you have to make another choice. And there are different things that are happening in that space, but I guess you are practicing.

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