

<http://revped.ise.ro>

Print ISSN 0034-8678; Online ISSN: 2559 - 639X

YOUNG CHILDREN'S AGENCY IN NURSERIES: PREMISE FOR LEARNING FOR LIFE

Perspectiva agentică a copiilor mici în creșe: premisă a învățării pentru viață

Cătălina ULRICH HYGUM, Erik HYGUM

Journal of Pedagogy, 2023 (2), 33 - 53

<https://doi.org/10.26755/RevPed/2023.2/33>

The online version of this article can be found at: <https://revped.ise.ro/category/2023/>



This work is licensed under the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-ShareAlike 4.0 International License.
To view a copy of this license, visit <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-sa/4.0/> or send a letter to Creative Commons, PO Box 1866, Mountain View, CA 94042, USA.

Published by:

**CENTRUL NAȚIONAL DE POLITICI ȘI EVALUARE ÎN EDUCAȚIE
UNITATEA DE CERCETARE ÎN EDUCAȚIE**

<http://www.ise.ro/>

<https://rocnee.eu/>

Further information about *Revista de Pedagogie* – *Journal of Pedagogy* can be found at:

Editorial Policy: <http://revped.ise.ro/editorial-policy/>

Author Guidelines: <http://revped.ise.ro/en/author-guidelines/>

YOUNG CHILDREN'S AGENCY IN NURSERIES: PREMISE FOR LEARNING FOR LIFE

Cătălina Ulrich Hygum*

University of Bucharest,
Faculty of Psychology and Educational Sciences,
Bucharest, Romania
catalina.ulrich@fpse.unibuc.ro

Erik Hygum**

VIA University College,
Research Center for Pedagogy and Education,
Aarhus, Denmark
eh@via.dk

Abstract

In the current landscape of restructuring early childhood education and care (ECEC) services for children under three years old in Romania, this article aims to delve into the concept of child agency. It emphasizes children's learning for life as a complementary aspect to prevailing discourses that view ECEC solely as a foundation for lifelong learning. Through an exploratory study employing a case study approach within early childhood institutions (crèches), the article scrutinizes the agency of young children. It is immersed in interpreting the agentic child within Romania's multifaceted national ECEC context, seeking to answer the question: How can the perspective of child agency contribute to the development of ECEC institutions and staff?

The authors' understanding of agency draws inspiration from recent discussions on agential realism, marking an ontological shift within education and sociology (Barad, 2007). Agency, entwined within relationships, navigates between the child's intentions, daily routines, structures, materiality (Spyrou, 2018), and interactions with staff and peers. Empirical data, presented as vignettes, offer glimpses into the child's agency during play, meals, and other activities.

* Professor, PhD, Department of Education Sciences, Faculty of Psychology and Educational Sciences, University of Bucharest, Bucharest, Romania.
<https://orcid.org/0000-0001-9309-3741>

** Executive Senior Adviser, PhD, Research Center for Pedagogy and Education, VIA University College, Aarhus, Denmark. <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-6396-6978>

Insights into how children utilize their bodies, indoor and outdoor spaces, sounds, and materials possess the potential to guide further research in the realm of early childhood education. Additionally, these insights may inform professional development within the ECEC field.

Keywords: agency, early childhood education, nursery, sociology of childhood.

Rezumat

În contextul actual din România, în care serviciile de educație timpurie și îngrijire pentru copiii sub trei ani sunt în proces de restructurare, acest articol aduce în discuție conceptul de „agency”, accentuând învățarea pe parcursul vieții, în complementaritate cu discursurile predominante despre educația timpurie și îngrijirea copiilor, considerate ca fundație pentru învățarea continuă pe tot parcursul vieții. Bazat pe un studiu empiric explorativ, articolul analizează comportamentele agentice ale copiilor mici în cadrul creșelor, folosind abordarea studiului de caz. Axat pe interpretarea potențialului acțional al copilului în contextul complex al educației timpurii, articolul gravitează în jurul întrebării: Cum putem utiliza perspectiva agentică a copilului pentru dezvoltarea instituțiilor de educație timpurie și pentru formarea personalului?

Autorii înțeleg conceptul de „agency”, inspirați de dezbaterile recente referitoare la „agential realism” (Barad, 2007), care reprezintă o schimbare ontologică în domeniul educației și sociologiei. Manifestată în relații, capacitatea agentică este împletită între intențiile proprii ale copilului, rutinele zilnice, materialitatea (Spyrou, 2018) și relațiile cu personalul și ceilalți copii din creșă. Fragmentele din datele de teren ilustrează momente în care copilul se manifestă agentic în timpul meselor, tranzițiilor, jocului sau în alte activități.

Rezultatele, care evidențiază modul în care copiii își folosesc corpul, spațiul creșei sau curtea, sunetele și materialele, pot stimula cercetări ulterioare privind copilăria timpurie și dezvoltarea profesională în domeniul educației și îngrijirii.

Cuvinte-cheie: agency, creșă, educație timpurie, sociologia copilăriei.

Introduction

The title draws inspiration from key factors. Firstly, it emphasizes the critical first 1000 days of child development (Lipina & Posner, 2012; Mustard, 1999; Pakulak et al., 2018). Secondly, it aligns with children's rights (United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, 1989), underlining the respect owed to children in their world. Consequently, Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) services should not merely support parents but should also provide life opportunities for children (Pacini-Ketchabaw et al., 2021). Thirdly, the article contributes to the ongoing development of crèches in Romania, promoting a coherent, inclusive, and high-quality ECEC system.

Despite the assumed interconnectedness of ECEC, learning, and life, we spotlight the living-learning dichotomy evident in discussions about children as beings or becomings (Kampmann, 2003). These ontological distinctions are crucial for understanding children, staff, and pedagogy in ECEC institutions for 0-3-year-olds. Stemming from a broader study exploring the concept of child agency in diverse socio-cultural contexts (2019-2021), this article specifically delves into young children's agency in Romanian ECEC nurseries. Intending to introduce the concept of agency into national ECEC discourses, the article addresses the question: How can the perspective of a child's agency be applied to the development of ECEC institutions and staff?

1. Background

1.1. ECEC in Romania

Investing in ECEC for lifelong learning is well-documented (European Council, 2022; Heckman et al., 2013; Melhuis et al., 2018; Yoshikawa et al., 2013). However, Romania falls below the European average of 35.9%, with only 12.3% of children under three years in formal childcare in 2022, according to Eurostat data (Eurostat, 2022). Formal ECEC in Romania has historically served as a supplement to familial care during the early years (Kovács, 2018). While recent efforts by the Ministry of Education aim to improve the availability and quality of 0-3-year-olds education and care, legislative changes (HG no. 566/2022) and the ETIC project curriculum (Proiect E.T.I.C., 2020) are still evolving.

Since 2010, the Early Learning and Development Standards (ELDS) have been a common reference, incorporating cultural and national contexts. Despite functioning as a valuable resource, ELDS primarily reflect adult expectations and standards (Ionescu et al., 2010).

This article introduces a broader perspective on children's learning and development, framing ECEC institutions as foundations for lifelong learning. Based on a field study (2019-2021), we propose complementing ELDS with the concept of agency. This concept fosters a holistic understanding of children's learning, emphasizing their existence in relational contexts. It represents an ontological shift away from individualistic views, redirecting focus from preparing for a school and labor market to acknowledging the child's presence in the world. This perspective aligns with a shift from a modern, predictable society to a relational, post-Anthropocene context (Barad, 2007; Spyrou, 2019).

1.2. Theoretical framework: Agency

Around the turn of the millennium, the field of child and childhood studies witnessed a growing interest in exploring the concept of child agency. The new sociology of childhood employs various approaches to achieve this objective. From a macro-sociological perspective, scholars like Qvortrup (1997) and Alanen (2014) demonstrate how childhood operates as a social structure. On a micro level, researchers with an interactionist or social constructionist epistemology, such as Christensen and James (2000) and Corsaro (1979, 2005), analyze how children adapt to and change routines and relationships in childhood institutions. Commonalities among these diverse approaches, as highlighted by Kampmann (2003, p. 80), include:

- The centrality of children's agency, defining a new sociological paradigm, irrespective of ontological differences. Corsaro (2005) emphasizes, through the concept of interpretive reproduction, that children don't merely reproduce but actively participate in and contribute to shaping new routines and structures in daily life.
- Emphasis on what the child is doing "here and now", challenging developmental psychology's compartmentalization of childhood into distinct

phases and themes. The focus is on understanding the children in their own right, encapsulated in the contrast between (positive) recognizing the child as a human being and (negative) viewing the child as a human becoming towards adult life.

- The overarching ambition to adopt the child's perspective, triggering methodological discussions on how to give voice to the child in the research process (Spyrou, 2011) and epistemological discussions on analyzing the child's perspective (Hygum, 2003; Warming, 2019).

The new paradigm encompasses the intricate nature of agency (Varpanen, 2019). Agency can be perceived as both an analytic concept and an empirical phenomenon, providing descriptive and normative perspectives, often concerning the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989). It can also focus on individual or structural aspects. Degotardi, Page, and White (2017) highlight that the recent emphasis on relational dynamics and active participation signals a need for revised conceptualizations of the intersectionality between relationships, pedagogies and very young children as learners.

Recent works by Spyrou (2019), Huf and Kluge (2021), and Warming (2019) present a fresh understanding of children's agency. Drawing inspiration from Barad (2007), this approach, termed agential realism, represents an ontological shift in childhood studies. Grounded in a materialist, posthumanistic, relational ontology (Barad, 2003), it challenges the concept of an autonomous, individual human subject superior to nature. According to Barad (2003), an agency cannot be designated as an attribute of "subjects" or "objects". In the context of our discussion, this perspective emphasizes how a child's agency is intricately entwined with the social, cultural, and material world.

Searching for the child's specific "code" of agency presents various methodological challenges. Beyond the inherent theoretical ambiguity of "agency" and the difficulty in deciphering young children's intentions due to their ongoing development in walking, talking, and expression, the concept itself poses translation challenges into the Romanian language. This translation dilemma underscores the social and cultural constraints of the concept. "Agency" can be translated as "potențial acțional", "auto-determinare", "intenționalitate", or "capacitate agentică". From this translational

perspective, agency is individually anchored, connoting autonomy, initiative, and self-determination while lacking a relational viewpoint.

The OECD publication *Learning Compass 2030* defines students' agency as culturally bounded (2023, p. 1). However, children younger than three are nearly invisible as social agents in education or childhood studies in Romania and internationally. When addressed in education studies in Romania, the agency is predominantly approached from a political perspective of children's participation (Bejenaru, 2015; Popa, 2021) and through family and school analyses (Bejenaru, 2015; Popa, 2021; Stănciulescu, 2010).

2. Methodological framework

2.1. Aim

The exploratory study seeks to deepen the understanding of agentic behaviors and strategies of young children in nurseries and to provide insights for ECEC institutions and staff professional development programs. The study adopts an interpretive research design, following the framework outlined by Yanow and Schwartz-Shea (2015).

2.2. Methods

We have chosen a qualitative multiple case study approach to offer a contextualized understanding of ECEC practices in two Romanian crèches. This study follows an instrumental case study design as outlined by Stake (1995). Case study, according to Creswell (2013), “explores a real-life, contemporary bounded system (a case) or multiple bounded systems (cases) over time, through detailed, in-depth data collection involving multiple sources of information... and reports a case description and case themes” (p. 97). Figure no. 1 provides an overview of the main contextual factors, the flow of main activities observed during daily life, and the methods and documents used for analysis.

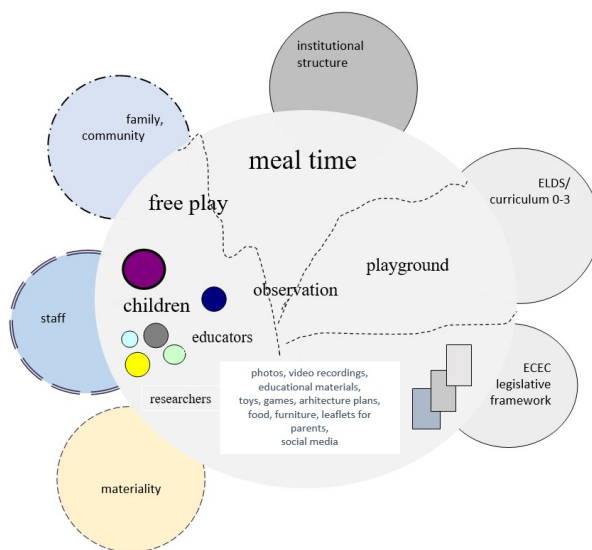


Figure no. 1. Case study design (adapted from Stake, 1995)

2.3. Data collection

From May to June 2019, we immersed ourselves in the daily dynamics of the nurseries, engaging with staff and exploring the surrounding neighborhoods. Both researchers diligently recorded field notes, captured photos and videos, and investigated physical artifacts such as toys, learning materials, play areas, stations, food items, musical instruments, and outdoor facilities. Formal interviews were conducted with the crèche coordinators and representatives of the General Directorate of Social Assistance and Child Protection (GDSAP). However, for the purposes of this article, we primarily rely on observational data. Informally, we interviewed staff and parents to gain a deeper understanding of the context and practices, obtaining their consent. From July to November, we conducted participant observations spanning 15 full days of activities in the crèches. This encompassed observing daily routines, commencing from the morning opening at 6:30 until the children's midday nap around 12:45. Our primary focus was on deciphering the

intentions and interactions of the children (Hedegaard, 2013). Detailed field notes were complemented with photos and videos. Our observations involved 47 children (30 in the first crèche and 17 in the second), documenting their interactions with educators and peers, group dynamics, transitions, planned activities, and free play.

Twice a day, both researchers dedicated 30-45 minutes each to focus on the same randomly selected child, totaling observations for 10 girls and 11 boys aged 12-20 months in Romania. As part of our observations, we specifically examined children's communication strategies, gradually narrowing our focus to children's expressions of distress, such as crying (Ulrich Hygum & Hygum, 2021).

2.4. Research sites and participants

The research was conducted in two public ECEC centers in Bucharest, referred to as crèches (*creșă* in Romanian), operating under the local administrative authority GDSAP. These crèches are operational from 6:30 am to 6:00 pm, five days a week, throughout the year, providing care for children aged between 6 months and 3 years. They adhere to national regulations concerning group size, caregiver-to-child ratios, and staff certification.

In our study, we use the terms nursery and crèche interchangeably. The umbrella term "educator" encompasses all ECEC professional staff, including nurses, educators, and caregivers (*îngrijitoare*, in Romanian), without distinguishing between different roles, as each plays a vital role in children's interactions and well-being. Throughout field observations, all children in the selected groups were observed ($N = 47$). We placed particular emphasis on the children's reactions toward us, the researchers, as we remained available to them without actively participating in their activities. Children approached us with curiosity, using us as witnesses for their initiatives and as resources for care, play, and exploration (Hygum & Ulrich Hygum, 2020). If our observation made a child uncomfortable or anxious, we promptly halted to respect the child's perspective and afford them the same right as staff and parents to withdraw from the project.

2.5. Data analysis

We manually coded observational data and augmented it with interviews, photos, videos, and content analysis of documents and artifacts. Observation passages were explicitly marked in the transcriptions, and both researchers cross-checked field notes. Following the thematic analysis approach inspired by LeCompte and Schensul (2010), we identified subsidiary categories such as space (where to stay), action (what to do), and permitted behavior (how to act as a child). This allowed us to analyze how the child's intentions and behaviors were influenced by specific expectations and interactional patterns. Our coding of observational data encompassed thematic units like communication, materiality, actions/doings, reactions toward adults' requirements (opposition, aggression, freezing, escaping, hiding), joyfulness, playfulness, and reactions to separation from parents.

To enhance the trustworthiness of the data, we engaged in an inter-coder dialogue and reached an agreement. Duo-ethnography log accounts (Lund et al., 2012) were incorporated to provide a meta-reflection on the researchers' understanding of agency as socially and culturally embedded, further strengthening the robustness of our findings.

3. Findings

We structured our findings around the central question: How do children respond to daily routines, activities, materiality, transitions, and interactions with staff and peers? In line with Stake's methodology (1995), we employ vignettes to illustrate aspects of the case and thick descriptions to convey our findings. In the upcoming section, vignettes serve to highlight patterns within the observational data, revealing the frequent occurrence of certain types of interactions and reactions. Through vignettes, we aim to bring to the surface the understanding of agential realism as embedded in the body, in action, in a specific social and cultural context, and a physical world (Simovska & Kousholt, 2021).

3.1. The indoor space and materiality

The indoor space is organized with distinct functions and classifications: the hallway serves as the transition (*triaj epidemiologic*) from the family to the ECEC institution; the main room is designated for activities and meals; the sleeping room, the largest space with 20 beds, is also equipped with bathrooms. In the sleeping room, each child has the clothes stored under his/her bed and awaits assistance from adults for dressing. The space is predominantly monofunctional, with clear boundaries delineating areas for sleeping, eating, planned activities, routines, and transitions. Children are well-acquainted with how to behave themselves in different sections of the space, both indoors and outdoors, as individuals and distinct from one another. In the main room, a carpet measuring 3x2.5 square meters defines the physical space for actions during free activities and serves as the central focal point for all interactions.

“In the Dragonflies group, at 8:20, seven children and one educator engage in play on the carpet. Marius, an 18-month-old, jumps three times in the center of the carpet, seemingly checking if Mara, the educator, is observing. He then points at something on the painted wall before turning towards the twin brothers, also 18 months old. Marius repeatedly kicks the tree painted on the wall. Mara notices and invites him onto the carpet with two Lego blocks.

Marius eagerly runs towards Mara, settles on her lap, and transforms the Lego blocks into imaginary guns, making the sound “Paaac-paaaac-paaaac” towards her. In response, Mara playfully mimics the sound with a softer “Pac-Pac”. Marius, undeterred, shouts “Pac-Pac” repeatedly, gradually growing louder. Mara, pointing to the wall, says, “cip cip cirip”. At 8:22, Marius hits the wall again and then joins the twin brothers.

The three boys momentarily lie on the carpet, occupying most of the space, before collectively embarking on a joyful run around the room.”

The carpet accommodates seven children and one educator which gives very little space for physical activities. The most common relation is a dyadic one, between the child and educator. On the carpet, the children are supposed to adapt to the legitimate way of expressing themselves (play peacefully

and be silent, not to play wildly). Marius attempts to raise the educator's attention, while she is busy with other children. He challenges her with his loud sounds and the educator, in return, tries to scaffold his behavior in a desirable way and converts the gun's sound into a bird's sound. Later, Marius and the twin brothers take temporary control by running in a circle, full of excitement, a reaction documented as a "sociality of children" (MacRae & MacLure, 2021, p. 266), with solidarity and complicity against the educator (Schultz, 2005, p. 8).

3.2. The body and soundscapes

Due to their developmental stage and limited verbal skills, children use their bodies as the main communication resource towards adults and peers. Children try to use the space, move around, approach each other, and manipulate objects. Such attempts are not encouraged by the nurseries' materiality and high level of space's classification. The following vignettes illustrate how meal time is organized and set specific limits towards children agentic behaviors.

"At 8.30 all children eat breakfast, assisted by two adults. Radu (19 months) stands up and steers at Mirela, who asks him: "Are you ready? Don't you want more?". He does not respond but demonstratively pushes his empty plate in the middle of the table, noisily. He drinks milk while gazing at Luca (15 months). He starts bending over the table three times, making noise, and leaves the table."

"At 12 o'clock, seven children are sitting around two tables; a younger boy (14 months) sits in a high baby-chair. Three staff members help them to eat and sit quietly during the lunch. Darius (19 months) stands up and the adult next to him asks him to sit and eat, but he only obeys when the educator firmly repeats. "You hardly open your mouth... I've never seen such a thing... Come on! Eat one spoon". The educator brings the spoon close to his mouth, saying: "Mommy will be here soon..."

The youngest children or those who are not yet eating receive assistance from educators, who continually encourage them to eat quietly and maintain

cleanliness. Despite adults having control over the situation during mealtime, children may attempt to alter the dynamics by keeping their mouths closed, spitting, making noise, turning around, playing with their food, or not swallowing. They often disengage from the dyadic relationship with educators, interact with their peers, and reshape the situation according to their intentions. Children leverage various elements such as space, furniture, food, cutlery, their bodies, and clothes to transform the environment based on their preferences.

Children's reactions during transitions and meals align with Fukkink's study, which also notes that "children's well-being was slightly lower during the transition and eating situations" (2021, p. 740). Mealtime and transitions, such as preparing the children to go outside or the staff making lunch preparations while the children are already seated at the table, consume a considerable amount of time and contribute to disciplining the child.

"At 9:10, children conclude breakfast and prepare for planned activities (*activități tematice*). One educator initiates the loudspeaker, and both educators commence dancing, producing joyful sounds and movements while repeating "Hopa-hop" (Gașca Zurli band). Two out of eight children, aged between 12-30 months, imitate the adults with discreet movements, while the others simply observe, not responding to the adults' invitations to join the dance. One educator lifts a boy in her arms, and her colleague takes a young girl and then holds the hands of two more children. Three children begin crying, and Costin leaves the group, opting to sit on the sofa. The educators maintain eye contact with the non-participating children, keeping a joyful and inviting attitude. At 9:18, they cease dancing, and one adult overturns a box full of plastic toys onto the carpet."

This excerpt provides an insight into the daily soundscape of the nursery: crying children, loud music, and noise from plastic toys. Many of these toys emit electronic sounds that become discordant and bothersome as the batteries deplete. From a sensory perspective, the high level of noise appears to overstimulate some of the children, eliciting responses such as crying, increased noise-making, moving to another area, or covering their ears. At times, children use crying as a collective reaction (Ulrich Hygum & Hygum, 2021). The elevated sounds pose challenges for both staff and children and create an ongoing struggle

to define the level and type of soundscape. The frequent use of loudspeakers for music and noise from plastic toys overstimulate one sense while diminishing others such as touch, taste, and smell, thereby influencing how children express themselves (Albon, 2021; Rosen, 2015).

3.3. The playground space

The physical space of the crèche serves as a social environment accommodating children's embodied experiences and agency. The outdoor playground, shared among all children's groups, is, however, constrained by stringent classifications dictating permissible activities. Most play facilities are designated for individual use, leading to children typically waiting in line for their turn, whether it be riding a horse, using sledges, or a slide. Educators, while not actively participating in the children's activities, carefully guide and monitor the use of the playground.

“At 10:40, five children are drawing with chalk on the pavement, while three others throw balls inside two circles set up between the trees. Additional children, accompanied by their educators, arrive and intermingle with other groups, causing the yard to become increasingly crowded as more of the 15 groups join. Most children play close to their educators, while some move around, interacting and playing with other children or adults, or simply observing. Educators attentively watch the children, ensuring orderly turns on individual swings or the slide. They caution children against climbing or jumping to prevent any potential risks.”

Occasionally, a child seeks to avoid the guidance of educators by finding secluded places where they can independently or with peers decide how to play.

“At the playground, Miruna, a 14-month-old, leaves her group engaged in playing with circles and small balls. Wearing a smile, she approaches the fence (an area where children are not allowed to go alone) and surveys her surroundings. After a brief movement, she observes five children sitting at a round table with an adult and joins them for a minute. She then heads to the swing area, where children are patiently waiting for their turn on one of the three swings. Greeted by two educators from the Ladybirds' group, Miruna briefly engages with them.”

She subsequently returns to the fence, checking if anyone notices her, and then hides behind a bench, initiating play with dry leaves. Miruna has already acquired the social norms of playing the “right” way, understanding how to use the correct equipment, waiting for her turn, and gaining acknowledgment from the educators. Additionally, she has learned how to evade the watchful eyes of educators when she desires a different activity. Miruna adeptly conceals herself from surveillance, initiating her play.

4. Conclusions

Our study aims to enhance the understanding of children under the age of three as active agents, navigating through interactions, routines, and the physical environment of the crèche. Extensive research shows the significant impact of space and materiality in ECEC settings on children’s well-being, development, learning, and growth (Løkken & Moser, 2012; Nordtømme, 2012). The provided vignettes serve as illustrations of the agency exhibited by young children, actively confirming, avoiding, modifying, or explicitly rejecting educators’ directives.

The dyadic relationship established in the crèche fosters the child’s need for attachment, viewing the crèche as a *second family* and educators as *second mothers*. During the day, on the carpet, educators often cradle children in their arms for extended periods, expressing affection through kisses and caresses, mirroring the familial environment. Daily routines are ingrained through verbal communication, with educators informing children about the day’s activities: playtime, meals, outdoor activities if weather permits, lunch, naptime, more play, and finally, the return home with “mother”.

Nevertheless, this close relationship can inadvertently lead to children competing for educators’ attention, leaving limited room for peer-to-peer play. While it is unquestionable that children in a nursery setting require a responsive connection with adults, as emphasized by Ereky-Stevens et al. (2018), interactions with peers and group dynamics serve as valuable resources for children’s overall well-being and learning for life. Within these social interactions, children observe, offer, and receive assistance from their peers, occasionally responding in solidarity, such as choosing to cry instead of dance, playing with food pretending to eat, hiding, or running away.

The informal discussions held with staff reveal that educators are aware of different representations promoted by the parents. Certain parents portray an agentic image, while others emphasize a more vulnerable depiction (Sorin & Galloway, 2006), a sentiment echoed by the majority of educators. A separate investigation into the perceptions and expectations of parents, practitioners, and experts highlighted notable disparities in their views on the functions and roles of nurseries (Ulrich Hygum & Hygum, 2023), with children seemingly occupying a peripheral role in these discussions. By emphasizing the child's agency, our study introduces a relational-ontological perspective that complements attachment-based and developmental viewpoints.

The patterns depicted in the vignettes mirror the analysis of the small-sized group. The micro-analysis should broaden its scope to encompass not only children's actions and reactions but also all layers of analysis requisite for a comprehensive case study. This exploratory study could be expanded to include a larger sample of children and ECEC staff. The observational study might benefit from an extended duration and a more extensive range of crèches, considering factors such as geographical coverage, size, public/private status, socio-economic levels of families, and pedagogical approaches.

5. Discussion and implication for practice

This article centers on child agency employing it as the lens through which subsequent reflections and questions about ECEC are examined. Hopefully, this could provide a more robust child's perspective, complementing the ELDS, curriculum approach, and other relevant regulations. Detailed observational data reveal that the range of children's agency within ECEC institutions may surpass what the physical space, material resources, and dyadic relationships between adults and children currently offer. The findings shed light on the intricate manifestations of agency in ECEC settings for children aged 0-3 years, prompting further exploration of the following questions.

- *How the physical layout and material elements within nurseries can promote children's agency?* Both indoor and outdoor spaces have the potential to either encourage, inspire, or limit children's experiences, interactions, and play. Guidelines regarding *where to be* and *what to do*

could be crafted with flexibility, allowing for greater alignment with children's intentions and actions.

- *How to foster a full spectrum of sensory experiences for children in nurseries?* Transforming food and mealtime into a social and multisensory encounter can be very valuable. Additionally, creating an environment rich in natural materials, varied sounds, and diverse lighting can amplify children's opportunities to engage and express themselves through their senses and voices, whether through verbal communication or/and singing.
- *How can the balance between attachment and agency be achieved?* Comparative studies demonstrate that "pedagogy with very young children is a culturally specific phenomenon" (Cooper et al., 2022, p. 21). ECEC in Romania does not have a strong tradition and only a limited number of children under three years old are enrolled in formal care. Observational data and interviews reveal that ECEC professionals often adopt the practices inspired by families. Traditional attachment-grounded roles and health and safety responsibilities could be complemented by taking the child's perspective and, for instance, advocating for children's possibility of establishing strong relations with peers in nurseries. To understand young children's agency, there is a need for a deeper exploration of their experiences and everyday practice (Araújo et al., 2023, p. 444). Engaging ECEC staff in such exploration has the potential to transform (under-utilized) peer interactions and relationships into valuable learning and development resources (Oberhuemer, 2012; Rayna & Lævers, 2011).

In the context of the overarching theme "Beyond Rankings: Learning for Life and Authentic Evaluation", the final question arises: *How can we effectively navigate the ECEC field, considering both perspectives of the child's becomings and beings?* In this article, our focus centers on one facet of this analytical dichotomy - the child as a human being and learning for life. However, it is crucial to explore ways of integrating both ontological perspectives. This necessitates a comprehensive understanding of children's development and well-being through situated knowledge and a holistic approach, placing relationships at the core.

To address these questions, researchers and ECEC staff can collaboratively delve into the intricacies of children's lives in crèches. A nuanced and responsive understanding is essential, grounded in what young children

express. After the study, dialogues with educators ensued. Examining photographs taken in the playground, they observed that the long robes worn as part of their uniforms constrained mobility. As “reflective insiders” (Bancroft et al., 2014), they were empowered to discern aspects typically unseen or overlooked by conventional quality criteria. To highlight the richness of context and the depth of children’s reactions, we align with Crittenden’s suggestion: “Maybe we should return to slow, open-ended, observational research – because it increases the probability of finding something you didn’t expect and, therefore, can’t be found with existing assessments or tick-boxes” (2017, p. 440).

Acknowledgements

The authors express their gratitude to all the children, educators, and crèches who took part in this study.

References

- Alanen, L. (2014). Theorizing childhood. *Childhood*, 21(1), 3-6.
<https://doi.org/10.1177/0907568213513361>
- Albon, D. (2021). Scent and scent-orship in the nursery: why does it matter? *Ethnography and Education*, 16(3), 279-293.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/17457823.2020.1839778>
- Araújo, S. B., Elfer, P., & Quiñones, G. (2023). Preparing and supporting professionals working with infants and toddlers. *Early Years*, 43(3), 443-454.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/09575146.2023.2240668>
- Bancroft, A., Karels, M., Murray, O. M., & Zimpfer, J. (2014). Not Being There: Research at a Distance with Video, Text and Speech. *Studies in Qualitative Methodology*, 13, 137-153. <https://doi.org/10.1108/s1042-319220140000013009>
- Barad, K. (2003). Posthumanist performativity: Toward an understanding of how matter comes to matter. *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society*, 28(3), 801-831.
- Barad, K. (2007). *Meeting the Universe Halfway: Quantum Physics and the Entanglement of Matter and Meaning*. Duke University Press.
- Bejenaru, A. (2015). Copilul și copilăria din perspectiva schimbărilor sociale. In B. Voicu, H. Rusu, & H. M. Popa (Eds.), *Este România altfel? Societatea și sociologia... încotro?* (pp. 67-78). ULBS Publishing House & Tritonic Publishing House.

- Christensen, P. M., & James, A. (2000). *Research with children: perspectives and practices*. Falmer Press.
- Cooper, M., Siu, M., McMullen, M. B., Rochel, J., & Powel, S. (2022). A Multi-Layered Dialogue: Exploring Froebel's Influence on Pedagogies of Care with 1-Year-Olds Across Four Countries.”. *Global Education Review*, 9(1), 6-23.
- Corsaro, W. (1979). “We’re friends, right?”: Children’s use of access rituals in a nursery school. *Language in Society*, 8, 315-336.
- Corsaro, W. A. (2005). *The sociology of childhood*. Pine Forge Press.
- Creswell, J. W. (2013). *Qualitative inquiry & research design: Choosing among five approaches* (3rd ed.). Sage Publications.
- Crittenden, P. M. (2017). Gifts from Mary Ainsworth and John Bowlby. *Clinical Child Psychology and Psychiatry*, 22(3), 436-442.
<https://doi.org/10.1177/1359104517716214>
- Degotardi, S., Page, J., & White, E. J. (2017). (Re)conceptualising relationships in infant-toddler pedagogy. *Contemporary Issues in Early Childhood*, 18(4), 355-361. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1463949117742760>
- Ereky-Stevens, K., Funder, A., Katschnig, T., Malmberg, L.-E., & Datler, W. (2018). Relationship building between toddlers and new caregivers in out-of-home childcare: Attachment security and caregiver sensitivity. *Early Childhood Research Quarterly*, 42, 270-279. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ecresq.2017.10.007>
- European Council. (2022). *COUNCIL RECOMMENDATION on access to affordable high-quality longterm care*. <https://data.consilium.europa.eu/doc/document/ST-13948-2022-INIT/en/pdf>
- Eurostat. (2022). *Children in formal childcare or education by age group and duration - % over the population of each age group - EU-SILC survey*. Eurostat. https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/databrowser/view/ilc_caindformal/default/table?lang=en
- Fukkink, R. G. (2021). Exploring children’s well-being in daycare: how do children feel all day? *European Early Childhood Education Research Journal*, 30(5), 730-744. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1350293x.2021.2007971>
- Heckman, J., Pinto, R., & Savelyev, P. (2013). Understanding the Mechanisms Through Which an Influential Early Childhood Program Boosted Adult Outcomes. *American Economic Review*, 103(6), 2052-2086.
<https://doi.org/10.1257/aer.103.6.2052>
- Hedegaard, M. (2013). *Beskrivelse af småbørn*. Aarhus Universitetsforlag.
- HG no. 566. (2022, February 28). *Methodology of organization and operation of nurseries and other pre-school early education units*.
<https://legislatie.just.ro/Public/DetaliuDocumentAfis/254658>
- Huf, C., & Kluge, M. (2021). Being (with) batman – entangled research relations in ethnographic research in early childhood education and care. *Ethnography*

- and Education, 16(3), 248-262. <https://doi.org/10.1080/17457823.2021.1903961>
- Hygum, E. (2003). To take the child's perspective. In K. A. Petersen, S. Callevært, S. Lindblad, & A. Åberg (Eds.), *The Network society and the demand of educational changes: Vol. The Network society and the demand of educational changes*. Upsalla.
 - Hygum, E., & Ulrich Hygum, C. (2020). Vuggestuebørns perspektiver på forskere - metode og etik. Hvad synes børnene? Børns perspektiver i hverdagspædagogisk praksis. In A. Boye Koch (Ed.), *Hvad synes børnene?: børns perspektiver i hverdagspædagogisk praksis* (pp. 45-60). Akademisk Forlag.
 - Ionescu, M. (Ed.), Boca, C., Herseni, I., Ulrich, C., Anghelescu, C., Stativa, C., Popescu, I., & Novak, C. (2010). *Repere fundamentale în învățarea și dezvoltarea timpurie a copilului de la naștere la 7 ani*. Vanemonde. https://www.edu.ro/sites/default/files/_fi%C8%99iere/Invatamant-Preuniversitar/2016/prescolar/ORDIN%203851_2010_ANEXA_RFIDT.pdf
 - Kampmann, J. (2003). Barndomssociologi – fra marginaliseret provokatør til mainstream leverandør. *Dansk Sociologi*, 14(2), 79-93.
 - Kovaics, B. (2018). *Family policy and the organisation of childcare: hierarchies of care ideals*. Palgrave Macmillan.
 - LeCompte, M. D., & Schensul, J. (2010). *Designing and Conducting Ethnographic Research* (2nd ed.). Lanham.
 - Lipina, S. J., & Posner, M. I. (2012). The impact of poverty on the development of brain networks. *Frontiers in Human Neuroscience*, 6, 1-12. <https://doi.org/10.3389/fnhum.2012.00238>
 - Løkken, G., & Moser, T. (2012). Space and materiality in early childhood pedagogy – introductory notes. *Education Inquiry*, 3(3), 303-315. <https://doi.org/10.3402/edui.v3i3.22036>
 - Lund, D., Sawyer, R. D., & Norris, J. (Eds.). (2012). *Duoethnography: dialogic methods for social, health, and educational research*. Left Coast Press.
 - MacRae, C., & MacLure, M. (2021). Watching two-year-olds jump: video method becomes “haptic”.. *Ethnography and Education*, 16(3), 263-278. <https://doi.org/10.1080/17457823.2021.1917439>
 - Melhuis, E., & Gardiner, J. (2018). *Study of Early Education and Development (SEED): Impact Study on Early Education Use and Child Outcomes up to age four years*. University of Oxford. https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/1034451/SEED-Age_4_RESEARCH_BRIEF.pdf
 - Mustard, J. F. (1999). Brain development, child development – Adult health and well-being and paediatrics. *Paediatrics & Child Health*, 4(8), 519-520. <https://doi.org/10.1093/pch/4.8.519>
 - Nordtømme, S. (2012). Place, space and materiality for pedagogy in a kindergarten. *Education Inquiry*, 3(3), 317-333. <https://doi.org/10.3402/edui.v3i3.22037>

- Oberhuemer, P. (2012). Editorial. *Early Years*, 32(2), 109-112.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/09575146.2012.695110>
- OECD. (2023). *Conceptual learning framework. Student agency for 2030*. OECD. https://www.oecd.org/education/2030-project/teaching-and-learning/learning/student-agency/Student_Agency_for_2030_concept_note.pdf
- Pacini-Ketchabaw, V., & Prentice, S. (2021). Early Childhood Education in Canada During a Pandemic. *Journal of Childhood Studies*, 46(3), 1-2.
<https://doi.org/10.18357/jcs463202120385>
- Pakulak, E., Stevens, C., & Neville, H. (2018). Neuro-, Cardio-, and Immunoplasticity: Effects of Early Adversity. *Annual Review of Psychology*, 69(1), 131-156.
<https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev-psych-010416-044115>
- Popa, L. A. (2021). *Sociologia copilăriei: context teoretic și noi realități din România de azi*. Editura Presa Universitară Clujeană.
- *Proiect E.T.I.C.* (2020). Proiect E.T.I.C. <https://proiect-etic.usm.ro/>
- Qvortrup, J. (1997). Review Essay: Children, Individualism and Community. *Childhood*, 4(3), 359-368. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0907568297004003007>
- Rayna, S., & Laevers, F. (2011). Understanding children from 0 to 3 years of age and its implications for education. What's new on the babies' side? Origins and evolutions. *European Early Childhood Education Research Journal*, 19(2), 161-172. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1350293x.2011.574404>
- Rosen, R. (2015). "The scream": Meanings and excesses in early childhood settings. *Childhood*, 22(1), 39-52. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0907568213517269>
- Schultz, S. (2005). Finding Meaning in the Resistance of Preschool Children: Critical Theory Takes an Interpretative Look. In *Rethinking Resistance in Schools: Power, Politics, and Illicit Pleasures*. Bank Street College of Education. <https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED491763.pdf>
- Simovska, V., & Kousholt, D. (2021). Trivsel – befordrende eller tyrannisk begreb. *Pædagogisk Psykologisk Tidsskrift*, 1, 54-63. Dansk Psykologisk Forlag.
- Sorin, R., & Galloway, G. (2006). Constructs of childhood: Constructs of self. *Children Australia*, 31(2), 12-21. <https://doi.org/10.1017/s1035077200011081>
- Spyrou, S. (2011). The limits of children's voices: From authenticity to critical, reflexive representation. *Childhood*, 18(2), 151-165.
<https://doi.org/10.1177/0907568210387834>
- Spyrou, S. (2018). *Disclosing childhoods: research and knowledge production for a critical childhood studies*. Palgrave Macmillan.
- Spyrou, S. (2019). An Ontological Turn for Childhood Studies? *Children & Society*, 33(4), 316-323. <https://doi.org/10.1111/chso.12292>
- Stake, R. E. (1995). *The art of case study research*. Sage Publications.
- Stănculescu, E. (2010). Children and Childhood in Romanian Society and Social Research: Ideological and Market Biases and some Notable Contributions.

- Current Sociology*, 58(2), 309-334. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0011392109354247>
- Ulrich Hygum, C., & Hygum, E. (2021). Crèche and cry, here and there: exploring children's agency in Romanian and Danish nurseries. *Ethnography and Education*, 16(3), 327-342. <https://doi.org/10.1080/17457823.2021.1911669>
 - Ulrich Hygum, C., & Hygum, E. (2023). Mind the crèche! Controversial perspectives on the educational quality of Romanian crèches. *European Early Childhood Education Research Journal*, 31(5), 1-13. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1350293x.2023.2184843>
 - United Nations. (1989). *Convention of the rights of the child*. <https://www.unicef.org/child-rights-convention>
 - Varpanen, J. (2019). What Is Children's Agency? A Review of Conceptualizations Used in Early Childhood Education Research. *Educational Research Review*, 28, 1-26. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.edurev.2019.100288>
 - Warming, H. (2019). Børneperspektiv – en populær flydende betegn. *Nordisk Tidsskrift for Pædagogikk Og Kritik*, 5, 62-76. <https://doi.org/10.23865/ntpk.v5.1424>
 - Yanow, D., & Schwartz-Shea, P. (2015). *Interpretation and method: empirical research methods and the interpretive turn*. Routledge.
 - Yoshikawa, H., Weiland, C., Brooks-Gunn, J., Burchinal, E., Espinosa, L., Gormley, W. T., Ludwig, J., Magnuson, K., Phillips, D., & Zaslow, M. (2013). *Investing in Our Future: The Evidence Base on Preschool*. Society for Research in Child Development.

The online version of this article can be found at:
<http://revped.ise.ro/category/2023-en/>



This work is licensed under the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-ShareAlike 4.0 International License.

*To view a copy of this license, visit
<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-sa/4.0/>
or send a letter to Creative Commons,
PO Box 1866, Mountain View, CA 94042, USA.*

Versiunea online a acestui articol poate fi găsită la:
<http://revped.ise.ro/category/2023-ro/>



Această lucrare este licențiată sub Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-ShareAlike 4.0 International License.

*Pentru a vedea o copie a acestei licențe, vizitați
<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-sa/4.0/>
sau trimiteți o scrisoare către Creative Commons,
PO Box 1866, Mountain View, CA 94042, SUA.*