



Students' agency in an out-of-classroom setting: Acting accountably in a gardening project



Marjaana Kangas*, Olli Vesterinen, Lasse Lipponen, Kaisa Kopisto, Laura Salo, Leena Krokfors

University of Helsinki, Department of Teacher Education, P.O. Box 9, FI-00014 University of Helsinki, Finland

ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 30 May 2013

Received in revised form 29 November 2013

Accepted 6 December 2013

Available online 3 January 2014

Keywords:

Agency

Accountability

Out-of-classroom settings

Elementary students

ABSTRACT

This paper explores students' agency in an out-of-classroom setting in a Finnish elementary school and focuses on a curriculum-based gardening project participated in by eight fifth-grade students. The school's pedagogy has a long history of extending its learning environments out of classrooms and into nature and local farms. In our study, we focus on students' agency when they worked on a three-day gardening project. Analysis is oriented towards accountable aspects of agency emerging in learning. The findings suggest that accountability is manifested as various initiatives. First, the initiatives reflected individual accountability. Second, accountable acting involved the construction of mutual accountability. Third, accountability was demonstrated in initiatives connected with relational agency. Those initiatives included utilizing the support given by others, as well as being a resource for others.

© 2013 Elsevier Ltd. All rights reserved.

1. Introduction

The purpose of this paper is to investigate the manifestation of students' agency in an elementary school project where students took part in gardening as a component of their curriculum-based learning. This interest follows Edwards & D'Arcy's (2004) recognition of the dialectical relationship between learner and environment that is central to a Vygotskian approach to learning.

In recent years, there has been increasing research on elementary students' agency work in different educational settings (e.g., Bjorgen, 2010; Engle & Conant, 2002; Fisher, 2010; Gresalfi et al., 2009). Hence, the case reflects a wider interest in exploring students' agency work in out-of-classroom settings. The basic concept of agency is that people do not merely react to and repeat given practices. Instead, people have the capacity for autonomous social action, during which they intentionally transform and refine their social and material worlds, thereby taking control of their lives. Thus, agency relates to the capacity to initiate purposeful action that implies will, autonomy, freedom and choice within the affordances of the worlds that they inhabit (Bandura, 1989; Biesta & Tedder, 2007; Edwards & D'Arcy, 2004; Emirbayer & Mische, 1998; Engeström, 2005a, 2005b; Greeno, 2006a; Holland, Lachicotte, Skinner and Cain, 1998; Lipponen & Kumpulainen, 2011).

The research of students' agency in different elementary school practices has shown that out-of-classroom environments can provide significant possibilities for meaningful learning and interaction (Dewitt & Hohenstein, 2010; Mortensen & Smart, 2007; Waters & Maynard, 2010; Watson, Aubusson, Steel and Griffin, 2002). Dewitt and Hohenstein (2010), for instance, found that a more successful student–teacher interaction was manifested on field trips than in traditional classroom situations. Thus, as Kumpulainen and her colleagues (2010) argued, out-of-classroom settings, such as gardening, can provide opportunities for various kinds of work that enhances agency and that would not necessarily be possible in more conventional classroom activities.

In a historical light and across the international educational landscape, the idea of incorporating the natural outdoors, such as gardens, as an integral part of the curriculum is not new (Desmond, Grieshop and Subramaniam, 2004). For example, Froebel, one

* Corresponding author.

of the most influential educational reformers of the 19th century, argued in favor of integrating nature and school gardens into education. In recent decades, along with a new wave of using and researching gardens in educational practices, it has been emphasized that gardening can have multiple benefits on children's learning (e.g., Blair, 2009; Bowker & Tearle, 2007; Fusco, 2001; Rahm, 2010). For instance, Rahm (2010) observed that gardens can provide a space for students and teachers to be themselves, to act upon their creative needs and to take charge of their learning, that is, to exercise their agency. Thus, as "outdoor classrooms" and "living laborator[ies]", as Desmond and his colleagues (2004) called them, gardens can contribute to several aspects of basic education, including academic, social and life skills.

This study aims to explore in what ways agency – especially its accountable aspects – can manifest in out-of-classroom settings. This purpose is realized in investigating how agency emerges, individually and collectively, in an elementary school project where students participated in designing and building a vegetable and flower plot as part of their curriculum-based learning. The research context is provided by a Finnish elementary school community whose long-term mission has been to develop its pedagogy by promoting students' participative forms of learning and integrating more nature-based activities into the curriculum. Furthermore, the school has a long history of extending its learning environments to out-of-classroom settings, such as local farms.

Earlier studies have shown that in terms of agency, it matters to whom students are accountable (Boaler & Greeno, 2000; Gresalfi et al., 2009). Gresalfi et al. (2009) found out that the task itself affords different opportunities for students to engage in the activity. On the above-mentioned grounds, we began our empirical research with a general question in mind: In what ways does the agency emerge and what kinds of accountability arise in activities related to the gardening project.

2. Agency as acting authoritatively and accountably

In a socioculturally oriented research field, agency is conceptualized as an ongoing process of learning that is contextually and historically situated (e.g., Edwards, 2007; Edwards & D'Arcy, 2004; Engle & Conant, 2002; Greeno, 2006a, 2006b; Gresalfi et al., 2009; Kumpulainen, Krokfors, Lipponen, Tissari, Hilppö and Rajala, 2010). Agency is revealed in the actions that people take (Lipponen & Kumpulainen, 2011). As Gresalfi and her colleagues (2009) pointed out, "A person's agency in a brief episode of interaction is, in part, whether he or she initiates an idea, agrees with, elaborates on, questions, or disagrees with what someone else initiated, or refrains from responding. It also depends on whether her or his action is accepted, elaborated, questioned, challenged, or ignored" (p. 53).

In this study, we define agency as acting *authoritatively* and *accountably*, the emphasis being on accountable aspects of agency (see Engle & Conant, 2002; Greeno, 2006a; Gresalfi et al., 2009; Kumpulainen et al., 2010). According to Greeno (2006a), in interaction, individuals are positioned differently regarding "the *authority* and *accountability* that are attributed to them by others and by themselves" (p. 88). Thus, in various social settings, individuals are differently entitled and expected to initiate proposals for action, as well as challenge other participants' initiatives. In a classroom setting, acting accountably manifests as taking initiative and responsibility for joint work and learning. Usually, it requires that students be encouraged to be authors, to take initiative and to make decisions (Engle & Conant, 2002; Gresalfi et al., 2009).

From an educational point of view, it becomes essential how students are given opportunities to act, i.e., *in what ways* they are given chances to exercise their agency (Gresalfi et al., 2009; Holland et al., 1998). In their studies on student agency in classroom settings, Gresalfi and her colleagues (2009) explored how agency and accountability were distributed in classrooms through interaction between teachers and students as they work on mathematical content. They focused on the issues of how competence becomes established in collective activities, and questioned the role of the teacher who typically holds power in the classroom and determines what is correct and acceptable. The authors highlighted that the teacher not only is able to shape interaction and construction of competence, but students also play a role in this negotiation. They, for instance, asked classmates to help with or check mathematical solutions to make sure that their own answers are correct or relevant.

Gresalfi and her colleagues (2009) concluded in their studies that in the interaction between a teacher and students in a classroom setting, the following issues are usually negotiated: the kind of agency that the task and the participation structure offer, the things that the students are supposed to be accountable *for*, and the persons whom the students are expected to be accountable *to*. Hence, agency is seen as a social action in which learners take responsibility for their joint work and learning, displaying accountability to others, as well as to the activity in question, as Engle and Conant (2002) put it.

3. Methodology

3.1. Design of the study

This study took place in an elementary school setting in a Finnish village, located in a recognized national landscape area in Southern Finland. A characteristic of the school is that as part of its curriculum, it regularly conducts learning practices in out-of-classroom settings. The school places its educational emphasis firmly on nature activities, such as gardening and field trips to the local farms, to promote learning through action and experimentation.

The participants of the study were 8 fifth-graders (12–13-year olds), 4 girls and 4 boys, from a class of 21 students. The class teacher could be described as an expert and innovative educator who for over 20 years, has developed her professional competence and the school's pedagogical culture towards nature-based education and participative learning practices. Her teaching has been informed by the ideas of environmental education and fostering students' agency beyond school learning practices. One aim of the school curriculum is to increase students' sense of responsibility towards their own living environment

Download English Version:

<https://daneshyari.com/en/article/364461>

Download Persian Version:

<https://daneshyari.com/article/364461>

[Daneshyari.com](https://daneshyari.com)