

Examining authorial agency in elementary children's narratives

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ABSTRACT

This paper investigates stories written by children and aims to reveal how children resist or neutralise the social and cultural conditions in their writing. We draw on Archer's critical realist theory of agency and structure and Stephens' conceptualisation of agency as a relational experience that involves intersubjectivity. Looking at 8 stories written by year 5 and year 6 children, we explore how children exercise agency and challenge the sociocultural conditions. Our analysis explores children's authorial choices about discourse (language), story (characters, action, and settings) and significance (values and worldviews) and how these choices shape the author's agency or portray the agency of the characters. Overall, positioning against the sociocultural conditions is achieved and exercised through the child's position as the author or through the child's depiction of the characters and the use of 'subject positions' in stories. Findings suggest that agency is exercised in relation to a range of conditions including the laws of nature, normative social relations, interpersonal relationships, authoritative or passive parenting, and the socio-political context. The results shed light on narratives as spaces for children to practice agency and calls for pedagogical approaches that position children as active and capable participants of a classroom. Implications are discussed for education.

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1. Introduction

Agency has received increased attention by international education scholars and there is consensus that fostering classroom agency is an integral part of supporting students in the context of literacy education (Hill 2015; Rowe and Neitzel 2010; Vaughn et al. 2020). The term – agency – is often understood and conceptualised as the individual's capacity to make decisions, and act (see Houen et al. 2016; Mentha, Church, and Page 2015). It has a central place in the conceptualisation of how humans navigate themselves through the world (Archer 2000, 2012), and thus agency is not just an individual concept, but is inherently related to the contextual conditions and social groups within which and with whom it can be enabled or constrained. The application of this concept in the setting of

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elementary education has led to further understanding of how the learning environment – classroom discourse – and the broader sociocultural context affect learners in subject areas such as writing (Khosronejad et al. 2021; Ryan et al. 2022). The prospect of agency, as defined above, contributes to students' engagement and motivation in class, and specifically, in advanced skills of decision-making that are crucial in writing (Ng et al. 2024). In Archer's view, and the subsequent works applying Archer's theory in elementary education, the choices of the individuals are influenced by – but not determined with – external factors.

Pedagogical choices have an impact on children's agency (Smith 2016) and there is an ongoing demand about how children's voices can be incorporated into the classroom of different subject areas. Elementary education can and has provided arenas for the realisation of children's rights so they can exercise their agency (See Comber 2016; Haas Dyson 2020). Haas Dyson (2020) argues, however, that we are constrained and empowered by institutional structures including in classrooms. She points to rigid curriculum as constraining agency in writing. However, we argue that there is a lack of evidence about the nuanced personal, cultural and structural conditions as dynamic emergent properties that influence young writers in adopting agentic roles. We posit that one of the important aims of education during the elementary years is to help learners understand the enabling and constraining effects of structural and cultural conditions and enable them to actualise themselves and respond to their personal needs and interests and their relationships with others while navigating these conditions. Writing provides such opportunity for learners to develop their awareness about their agentic choices and we aim to demonstrate in this paper how opportunities could be taken up in elementary classrooms to build this awareness.

In following, we aim to extend the earlier adaptations of Archer's theory for the exploration of learner agency (Manyukhina and Wyse 2019) as a context dependent concept and advance the line of inquiry about children's agency in the elementary setting by exploring children's authorial voices in their writing. Our application of Archer's theory is a new approach to address the need for 'a more critical, nuanced, dynamic and complex conception of agency ... which considers the contextual, structural, moral and political aspects of children's agency' (Sirkko, Kyrönlampi, and Puroila 2019, 285).

2. Writing as a practice of agency

There is a view from some policy makers that a 'back to basics' approach should be implemented in classrooms, particularly with struggling students in low SES areas (Dockrell, Marshall, and Wyse 2016; Ng et al. 2024). This approach focuses on basic skills of text production rather than more advanced skills of decision-making in relation to context, audience, subject matter and student voice. Evidence is clear that writing requires both sets of skills (e.g. Cutler and Graham 2008) and that context, identity, beliefs and intentions are important aspects of writing (Graham 2018; Khosronejad, Ryan, and Weber 2023). There is a growing interest in enabling students as active learners in the process of learning. Despite focused curriculum requirements and calls for basic skills, educators are encouraged to allow space for learner's choice, and voice and empower them to influence the direction of their learning and exercise their agency (Manyukhina and Wyse 2019).

Writing is highly linked with a learner's sense of identity and it can provide opportunities for learners to exercise their agency and express their identities in different learning areas. In the process of writing, learners are involved in decision making (about their thoughts and language choices) to meet the purpose (e.g. to communicate, express themselves in certain ways, or influence others). Therefore, learners as writers are constantly making decisions to represent ideas, and themselves through the text (see Ryan 2014; Ryan et al. 2021). These decisions are shown to be mediated through personal conditions – of the writer's interests and priorities – and the context (cultural and structural) in which writers are socialised (Sok and Shin 2023).

We, along with others, define writers as performers and as active designers of text who shape meanings and themselves (Myhill et al. 2013; Ryan 2014). In this article, we maintain our focus on how children can achieve and practice agency in writing opportunities given the importance of student voice and agency in learning to write and writing to learn. Exploring writing as a practice of agency, we answer the question: In what ways do stories written by children portray agency? We aim to reveal how children accept, resist or neutralise the social and cultural conditions in their writing samples through a new lens of Archer's (2000) reflexivity theory and Stephens' (2012) intersubjective relations.

3. Theoretical approach

Our adaptation of Archer's critical realist theory of reflexivity in this study follows the call for 'intention-driven real school composing' (Haas Dyson 2020, 120). Haas Dyson (2020) argues that agency – and intentionality – are essential for making writing practices real to children. In order to unpack this 'intentionality', we apply Archer's theory of reflexivity (2000) and conceptualise learner's agency and the way it is formed within the learning environment's structural and cultural conditions. Archer introduces different roles that individuals play in this process of becoming. The first role is attributed to self as a 'primary agent' (p. 260) of the socio-cultural conditions. She argues that all humans act as 'primary agents' because they are embedded within society's socio-cultural conditions and may act in subconscious ways because of that. The other two social roles that Archer attributes to humans entail agency in the form of a critically reflexive response to society: 'corporate agency' related to collective transformation of self and society, whereby agents interact with other agents and collectively bring about changes in context that are not necessarily for their own self-interest; and 'social actor' which relates to the individual's active participation in change for their own benefit. Social actors, therefore, invest in their personal agenda and their role as teacher, friend, writer, activist and so on, and make decisions about and reflect on how they want to respond to sociocultural conditions. We were interested in the extent to which the students in the study represented these social roles through their writing.

Archer's theory also pays attention to how the interplay between humans and society is constituted by the emergence of properties that relate to both humans and society (Archer 2000). Personal emergent properties (PEPs) relate to personal identity such as values, emotions, beliefs, worldviews. Structural emergent properties (SEPs) are orders of society and include systems, and resources. Cultural emergent properties (CEPs) are the norms, ideologies and expectations of a community within which individuals operate.

These properties can be experienced as both enabling or constraining as humans reflect on them and make decisions to act.

Our adapted definition of agency draws on Archer's conceptualisation and looks at how individuals respond to the sociocultural conditions (including structural or cultural properties) and makes distinction between individuals as primary agents and individuals as social actors. Furthermore, it entails the claim that agency is relational and individuals enact their agency through intersubjective relationships (Stephens 2012). Therefore, one individual's agency has the potential to limit or enable other individuals' agentic choices and acts.

4. Method

4.1. Sampling procedure

Data presented in this paper draws on a larger Australian funded project (with ethics approval from three universities and two school systems) aimed at improving writing in Australian elementary schools. Data for the project was collected across 7 schools between 2019 to 2022 and included classroom observations, teacher and student interviews, and the collection of students' written artefacts. To answer the research questions, we focused on stories written by a group of year 6 children who provided consent across two Australian schools.

We applied a definition of narrative writing that refers to crafting stories using elements such as plots, characters, settings, themes, and actions (Jeong 2017; Sok and Shin 2023) and maintained our interest in the authorial choices made in relation to these elements. Children's narratives were produced during writing lessons on 'imaginative texts' in response to tasks designed by teachers. The Australian Curriculum defines *imaginative texts* as 'texts whose primary purpose is to entertain or provoke thought through their imaginative use of literary elements'. (ACARA 2024). The writing topics were selected by teachers based on students' interests and were for example about 'space mission', 'super powers', or 'magic hat' which had intertextuality with the texts experienced by children. Due to the open-ended nature of the writing tasks, children's compliance with the teacher's instruction was not the subject of analysis. Instead we looked for evidence of agency in relation to a broader sociocultural context surrounding children and the characters. The criteria for inclusion in this analysis was the presence of identifiable characters, settings, and actions in a piece of writing considered to be 'almost finished' by children and the research team. Out of 12 stories, four of them were excluded from further analysis because the plots were incomplete and the themes did not address the question of agency – which, in our view, needs to be inherently related to actions and the contextual conditions – and were therefore deemed inappropriate for the purpose of this paper.

4.2. Analysing agency in stories

Our analysis aimed at identifying how children exercise agency through the choices they make as authors. We followed a two-step deductive process to explore authorial agency including the portrayal of the characters' agency in the

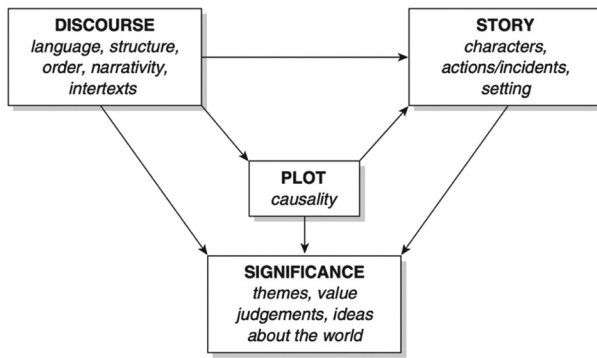


Figure 1. The four components of narrative (Stephens 2010).

stories. First, data were collected about the components of narrative illustrated in [Figure 1](#) (Stephens 2010): 1) Discourse, 2) Story, and 3) Significance. Children's discursive choices were particularly important for the exploration of authorial agency. They were noted for the way they positioned characters, or the readers to align with certain ways of thinking. For example, the author's 'use of first-person' was labelled for its impact on the reader to empathise with the focalising character. Other examples, included the author's use of dialogue in order to position one character as the 'knower' and creating a power relationship.

We also used textual information to identify elements of the story: the characters (including noting if the character was the protagonist), the corresponding actions, and setting for each individual story (e.g. 'explained Bill' was noted as Bill's – the character – active participation). Active characters were those who took action, were involved in acts of decision making, and engaged with the environment and other characters. Lastly, each story was labelled for its 'significance' and their proposed worldview.

Second, we conducted discourse analysis informed by Archer's theoretical constructs (Archer 2000, 2012). We drew on Archer's conceptualisation of the sociocultural conditions comprising structural and cultural properties and made distinctions between individuals as social actors and individuals as primary agents. Because our adapted definition of agency was about responding to the sociocultural conditions, our examination was focused on how children approached SEP and CEP and whether they chose to accept, challenge or neutralise them in their writing. More specifically our analysis examined instances in which children (as writers) or the identified characters in the stories exercised their agency by making choices concerning CEP and SEP, where social or cultural norms seemed to be maintained, or where children or characters in the stories provided and acted on alternatives.

Hence, we explored representations of agency by looking at children's choices through the components of narrative and asked what the story implies and what the author's language choices and the proposed values reveal about responses to sociocultural conditions. We organise the analysis section according to the categories of sociocultural conditions that were identified and discussed among the research team members during the second stage of analysis.

5. Analysis of stories and discussion

Overall, positioning against the sociocultural conditions is achieved and exercised through the child's position as the author or through the characters and the use of 'subject positions' in stories. The characters' agency relates to the acts of both children and adults. Furthermore, findings suggest that agency is exercised in relation to a diverse range of conditions including the laws of nature, normative social relations, interpersonal relationships, authoritative or passive parenting, the socio-political conditions and the environment.

5.1. Agency as disrupting or maintaining the 'laws of nature'

The story discussed in this section pivots on a paradox of the real and the imagined by focusing on the scientific laws of nature through normative social relations. Alice – the author – exercises agency in the form of breaking the scientific laws and providing an alternative explanation to what is known to the reader as scientific knowledge about the reproduction of plants. It also positions the boy as active contributor of knowledge and the girl as passive receiver of knowledge, which is a powerful CEP in literature and the media (Adam and Harper 2023).

Story 1

Crack! Crack! 'The egg is hatching!' exclaimed Mary. 'I wonder what kind of animal could be inside?'

'No Mary these eggs don't hatch animals they hatch trees!' explained Bill

'What?, Trees' Questioned Mary

'Yes, trees!' Answered Bill

'Let me tell you a story about how trees are made' mentioned Bill.

'OK' Said Mary excitedly.

'So, When it rains, sometimes little eggs come down in the rain. These eggs look like rocks and are the size of seeds. When the egg hits the ground it immediately starts growing and as quick as a flash the egg is the size of a boulder. When the egg is ready it will start hatching. When the tree is hatched it will climb out of the egg and plant itself in the ground'. Bill Reported

'This very tree was not a normal tree this was a meat ball tree. I could just imagine the juicy plump meat balls dangling from the tall meat ball tree. Can't you Mary?' Blabberd Bill dazzling

The story foregrounds a fantasy scenario about a meatball tree hatching from an egg. Mary is positioned as grateful and enthusiastic about the rupture in her expectations about seeds, eggs, and food, and the reader is introduced to the fantasy world alongside the character Mary. Alice's use of the word 'normal'—when Bill questions Mary in the end—implies an intention in breaking the 'norms' and acting disruptively about the socially acceptable knowledge on the topic. On the other hand, it reflects gendered social norms of agential boys and passive girls that are common in children's literature (Cutler and Lewis 2023). Alice invites the reader to participate in the imaginary world of Bill when he asks 'I could just imagine the juicy plump meat balls dangling from the tall meat ball tree. Can't you Mary?' Therefore, agency is connected to how the individual constructs and negotiates meaning about the social and cultural reality. Alice acts as a social actor (Archer

2000) by reflecting on CEP (normative knowledge) and shaping the reader's expectations of the subject matter and the social relations through the character Bill.

5.2. Acts and intentions of self in relationship with peers

The second theme presents a variety of barriers faced by the characters in relationship with peers. These barriers include bullying, and power relationships. For example, *The Pesky Cockatoo* (story 2) – inspired by four teacher-assigned photographs of a cockatoo and a koala fighting for space on a tree branch – is written in the form of fable and explores the topic of harassment. Ben – the author – writes from the perspective of the koala who is hurt by the words and actions of the '*Pesky Cockatoo*'. Kam the koala is verbally and physically attacked by Pacca the cockatoo for no apparent reason.

Story 2 The Pesky Cockatoo

'Look at this fat koala. Probably can't even see his toes', said Pacca. 'He is one of the biggest wimps the world has ever seen!' exclaimed Pacca. I kept on climbing the eucalyptus tree. 'Loser, loser', said Pacca. These words hurt, but I kept on climbing. I could tell that he was going to attack me. Then, as I predicted, he did.

'Okay, that's it!' said Kam. My anger bursted out like a bottle of coke getting all it's liquid out. I went to him and he was off balance. 'Never, ever tease me, otherwise you faced the consequences!' I explained. 'Help me, help me', said Pacca. When he said this, I threatened him more and he fell of the eucalyptus branch. Luckily he flew and he left. 'never annoy again'. I said. That day onward, he never saw him again.

Ben's choice of language in describing Kam as 'fat and wimpy', and a 'loser' by Pacca is illustrative of a conflict between the two characters. However, the plot forms around Kam's determination to resolve the situation and ends with his victory over Pacca's bully. Agency is exercised through Kam's victory in two distinct ways. First, it explores inter-subjective agency as Kam's ability to exert influence on the situation and to create opportunity for oneself through action (Vaughn 2018). Second, Ben challenges the reader's perception of strength (CEP). The author's use of first-person from the perspective of the victim invites the reader to empathise with the victim. The reader is encouraged to understand Kam's feelings and celebrate Kam's victory. Again we see the practice of agency appears through the role of social actor (Archer 2000) attributed to Kam.

The koala and the cockatoo (story 3) is inspired by the same set of photographs – of a cockatoo and a koala. Jordan – the author – describes the character of Max as 'cool' and seemingly popular versus Pencils and uses dialogue to depict a hierarchical relationship between the two characters. Pencils' position as Max's admirer and Max's 'order' in return establishes a sense of power relationship.

Story 3 The koala and the cockatoo

'OMG JUST LEAVE ME ALONE!' yelled koala Max.

'But I am just bored and I want to play with someone' explained Pencils the cockatoo.

'Well then go play with someone else' whined Max.

'But no one else is cool like you' said Pencils

'Well in that case, give me a massage' ordered Max.

Both characters show agency in pursuing their goals through this interaction. However, Max's request for a massage – which appears unexpectedly and ironically to the reader – plays out a behavioural dynamic that questions the moral component of agency and intersubjectivity. By definition, moral agency suggests that one should not practice agency by denying it to another (Rudd 2017). The text implies that intersubjectivity is probably overlooked as Jordan uses contrasting language choices by the two characters: 'order' and 'play'.

The last story in this theme is *Super Powers* (story 4): an imaginary fantasy that revolves around sibling conflict and the superpower of ice as a problem solving strategy used by the protagonist to overcome the conflict. The intended reader in the story is apparently other children. Flora – the author – takes the role of social actor (Archer 2000) and asks children to join in an imaginary scenario to 'take revenge on siblings' using magical means of ice.

Story 4 Super Powers

Have you ever wanted to make your revenge on your sibling/siblings? Well I have a solution! Ice power! You can give your siblings a brain freeze, their own little hail cloud and much more. Also, with ice power (the best ever), you can make it snow and build your snow castle. This is why ice power is essential.

You're alone on the mountains in your gigantic ice castle. You feel the fresh cold wind breeze past your side. You gradually descend your ice staircase. A large table setting is all neatly arranged in front of you. You feel so happy and grateful to have the best power in the world. The guests arrive, your beautiful creations, SNOWMEN! Ice tea and ice chocolate are handed around. You see there's no ice in the drinks. Not to worry! By the click of a finger you've saved everyone from melting. Now to go outside and make it snow.

Another reason why ice power is obviously the best is because in that boiling, bursting sun or in that torrential rain, you just wish it was snowing. Well never fear! You have ice power remember! A click of a finger – BOOM! Put on that fluffy coat – it's snowing. From building snowmen and bringing them to life to throwing snowball's at your innocent siblings faces. You're guaranteed that the best power to have is ice. Then it's time to cozy up with some hot chocolate. Watch another episode of Invisibility and laugh your head off.

Because obviously ice is the best! Now time for that revenge!

Okay throwing that snowball in their innocent face is pretty good. But what if you gave them their own little hail cloud? It would make their day miserable. Now it's the perfect time for that ice revenge. When they're in the shower having a nice, warm, refreshing shower, you make it the opposite. Time for REVENGE!

Make it hail on them, hear their innocent screams. Then, once they're out of the shower, they'll try to come into your room and to get their revenge. Just remember – you have ice power and you can freeze your door so they can't get in! See! Ice power is essential!

Now you know ice power is a necessity in our world. From freezing siblings, having a castle, making it snow inside and out makes it just extraordinary. Ice power is the solution to all of your problems. Ice power is a requirement and the best super power of all.

A major dynamic in this narrative is the use of ice power to attack and assert dominance over siblings with situations including throwing snow at 'their innocent face'. Flora takes the reader on a very direct and personal adventure into her world of ice magic and overlooks intersubjective agency. The protagonist's use of ice power is to exert agency on siblings without really sharing the perspective of siblings or considering the consequences of this agentic act on them. The fantasy world represents sibling conflict as a normal social relation (CEP) and introduces a familiar narrative discourse technique of

deus ex machina often used in fantasy genres and criticised as a lazy solution (or cop out) to a difficult conflict or plot situation (Sikora 2019). The magic ice solution to conflict somewhat lessens the agency of the protagonist in enacting change. The authorial identity is thus represented as one that avoids conflict.

The three above stories use different writing styles to portray conflicting issues associated with *self in relationship with others*. Overall, the characters' agency appears as the strategic making of relationships and resources as embedded within relations of powers (Lewis, Enciso, and Moje 2007). The authors apply subject positions and narrative devices (Stephens 2012) that represent not only their characters but necessarily themselves as they offer certain normative positions within social structures for readers to take up.

5.3. Representing acts and intentions of self in relationship with parents

This theme is illustrative of cases where children explore how they can harness their agency against authoritative parenting or challenge parental passivity in the face of problems. The first two stories are prompted by the writing task which asked students to write about outer space exploration. The following two authors practice agency through characters and actions that reflect the theme of the story. *Space Mission* (story 5) is about the undertaking of an important task that is confidential and is being kept 'secret' from parents. The role of social actor is attributed to the child protagonist in two ways. First, Emilia – the author – implies the child's autonomy by positioning her as the explorer of the new world – and the one who can overcome gravity – when referring to 'NASA trainings and missions'. Second, across the text, parents are positioned as the barriers to the protagonist's personal agenda while the protagonist plans for strategies to achieve her goals and exert her agency.

Story 5 Space Mission

This year hasn't turned out how I thought it would. Between trying to keep my secret and make sure I am prepared for my mission I am struggling to keep up. I am finding it hard not to tell my parents what is happening, they seem suspicious but aren't letting on that they know anything. All that I know has to be kept a secret a secret, if anyone finds out, the mission will be in jeopardy.

My elaborate Plan has been working well so far. The Planning, Sneaking and escaping I have been doing right under my parents noses has worked a treat. My favourite trick so far us having a body double and a secret hatch in my room. A Body because then my Parents still think I'm in bed but im not!! I'm actcully doing my G force traing and when I'm ment to be at School, I'm learning how to fly my rocket. I have the secret hatch to get out of my house without using my front door. because my [unclear]. The hatch leeds me to two bins of choice One takes my to NASSA training centre and one takes my Next door Neighbour to my room to remove the dummy from my room before he goes to School. Where Im Suppose to be.

I have recently Just been assigned a overseas mission in which involves heeps of training. So I havent been hoke alot. One of my training sessions was overseas where Im going to launch. My rocket for NASSA. At the Start a was When I first got assigned I was super excited but now getting closer and closer to the trip Im not so sure. I made the right dission. When I went over seas for training my Parents had an interview with my teacher and thats when I ascaped the house. To do that with my 8 siblings I asked NASSA for a small helicopter in the main. That I could enlarge and also a ride to the nearest helicopter pad. So that I could fly to Italy for training. In the mail they also sent me a time slower machine which only slows time down for my parents and siblings but the actual time still stays the same. For instance what would feel

like 1 minute is actually 3 and a half hours. for them. Lucky for me because then I have heaps more training time.

Then after 10 hours of training im exorsted. So I get some rest.

Emilia problematises the notion of parental control and engages the reader in problem solving strategies to come up with new solutions. SEPs such as a hatch and time slower machine are introduced to enable the subversion of control. Emilia's use of subject positions (through characterisation, and plot) highlights the tension between the child's desire for agency and the constraints of cultural norms. For example, the character's decision to keep their mission a secret from their parents goes against the cultural norm of parental involvement and protection. However, by positioning the character as the corporate agent (Archer 2000) in the story who is contributing (presumably) to an international mission that transcends parental power, the character has licence to maintain control and achieve her goals. Structural and cultural emergent properties are called on to provide a literary suspension of belief for the fantasy.

In *Drought* (story 6), Leon – the author – explores environmental problems through the character of Morgan: a child on a farm who sees his father suffering and fears having to move from his lifelong home. Morgan and his father relate to each other in an empathetic manner and share the dilemma of a drought ruining their crops. He wants to help solve problems but lacks agency. He cannot control the weather, and his father makes unilateral decisions about where they will live. Morgan is very enmeshed with his father. He does not go to school and the identity of his mother is obscured from him.

Story 6 Drought

It's been 2 years now. I haven't even felt the coolness pf the rain. I'm starting to think I never will. It wasn't always like this. There used to be [unclear] green fields, swarming with bees, and a wonder-ful painted barn.

That barn is part of our farm. Not much of a farm anyway. Everything is dried up, fields are dead and the river is alot smaller than what it used to be.

A live with my dad on a farm. I never met my mum, dad said she died during child birth. But I think something els is telling me she is still alive, I guess I will never know. I have a dog named max, he's old but he's the best.

I'm just working on the crops with my dad as usual, on every Tuesday. I dont go to school like other kids. Instead I work here. Any way I was just picking up a dusty dry cabbage when I heard a scream. 'AHHH!' It came from the river. I ran to Dad to dins the river has shrunk. 'What happened dad?' I ask him in a way as if I did'nt know. "The river, its evaperted Morgan! I take a deep breath and I take a step towards the small warm river. I start to calm down but I was stoped. I saw a large dead fish. Dad takes 4 small steps of anger, he picks up the fish and in a way of hope he said "Who's up for fish for dinner.

1 month later. . .

'Morgan! Morgan! Get up!' I wake up to my dads terrified sweaty face. 'What is it dad?' 'I don't know! The water just shut off!' I move to get out of bed. Creak! The door closed as I got up. I take a step slipping my slippers on. I take a deep breath. I then open the door revealing the dry, water-less river. I walk to dad, I can see him struggling to hide it but he failed, I can see him, he's crying. 'Pack your stuff, we're moving'. 'Moving!?! I dont want to move!' I say. I want to keep arguing, but dad looks at me, I know he won't ask again. In anger, I turn to walk to the house. I pack all that I could, I hear my door slowly open. Dad peeps through. 'Morgan, I'm really sorry'. I look at dad. 'No im sorry dad. I let all my anger out on you. Im really sorry'. I say. 'We're moving tomorrow at twelve pm'. Dad informs me. 'You better get some rest'. He says. He's right I am tired. I slip into my bed. 'Good night dad'.

Bang! Clash! Grumble! I wake up to noisy sounds of max. I jump out of bed running to my window. I cant believe it! Rain clouds! I slip into my slippers, run to my back door and open it. Dads out here too. I start to feel little sprinkles of water hit my head. Not soon after that, those sprinkles became bullets of water darting into my boddy. I run to dad. 'Dad! Look!' I scream. 'It's raining!' Dad doesn't answer. He just continues to watch the miracal. I tug on his drenched t-shirt, hoping for an answer. 'Morgan there's something you should know. Your mum is alive' . . . WHAT!?. . . 'Why are you telling me this now?' . . . To Be Continued.

This first-person prose invites readers to inhabit the character of Morgan. Dad's 'terrified sweaty face', his lack of knowledge about what has happened to the river, his 'failure' in hiding his tears, and his unilateral decision to move without including his child's concerns is a portrayal of an adult who acts passively in the face of constraining SEPs such as drought and family breakdown. The logical order and structure of the narrative are subverted to provide plot complications and resolutions quickly and episodically – almost as a panacea to his father's passivity. The focus of the story is on actions and incidents – particularly depicted through dialogue – rather than on characterisation, even though family relationships form part of the narrative. The child, Morgan, takes up the role of a primary agent caught up in sociocultural relations rather than a social actor in the face of the limitations he experiences. However, it is notable that the author Leon is playing a social actor (Archer 2000) role in criticising his father's passivity by showing its consequences on Morgan's sense of safety and continuity.

The question of family agency and how the developing construction of the character's agency compare with one another (Hardstaff 2015) is relevant to the stories in this category. The above stories suggest that often children take on roles as active agents just as their elders do (McDowell 2002) and as story 6 showed their agency is not limited to safe situations but is even explored within serious contexts that are expected to be handled by adults.

Story 7 portrays a mysterious man as a saviour of the world. George Marvin is summoned with his parents as part of a group of specialists to save the world after an apocalyptic flood. The character George frames this story and is framed as a corporate agent (Archer 2000) who works with others to collectively change things for the better. The mysterious character Code seems to have more answers and a deeper knowledge of how to address this dystopia. Oliver – the author – sets up the story with a 'sizzling start' – a term borrowed from the programme 'Seven Steps to Writing Success' (McVeity 2012) used by the teacher.

Story 7 The Flood

The Flood happened years ago. We had been hiding in a bunker for 15 years. My name is George, George Marvin. This was the first time I had ever seen the light and maby even the last.

A long time ago a volcano erupted and a humongous tsunami swept the city. I and the people who worked in a coffee shop had seen a poster saying "need help, come meet us at 12.00pm at [unclear] near the train. Now of course this note seemed a bit sketchy but we were in an oppocalyptic scenario and we would take whatever chances we could get.

Me, My mum, Dad and the coffee shop gang met up at the destination. It felt weird the smoke from the old train filled my lungs and it was hard to breathe. Finally, after 20 m of waiting a rusted pull up truck showed up at the destination. 'Hi, my name is code' the man said in an awfully deep voice. 'I'm here to help'.

A day later we met up with code again, he told us he's going to need more people to help him with rebuilding the village. he said it again with more detail. "specialists, we are going to need different types of specialists to help with different things like draining out water, building new landmarks and homes and it's only to name a few.

The reader is encouraged to feel a sense of hope and to expect that damage caused by the flood and volcano can finally be repaired if 'experts' work together (reflecting familiar and enabling structural and cultural emergent properties after natural disasters in Australia and around the world). The story is largely driven by incidents and dialogue with little exploration of intersubjective relationships (Stephens 2012) as the characters collectively exert corporate agency to manage the disaster. George's parents are still a major part of his life and accompany him on his adventures, suggesting a positive family dynamic (CEP). The enigmatic character of Code has important knowledge that is withheld from the protagonist and the reader, alluding to a potential constraint to agency if you place your trust in a stranger. The story isn't completed, like many of these samples, reflecting a structural constraint of time for the teachers in this study (see Ryan et al. 2022).

5.4. Agency and the socio-political conditions

Excerpt 8 has intertextuality with socio-political events surrounding the child at the time of writing. Emma – the author – imagines that she is then-Australian Prime Minister Morrison who is in trouble for being late to the parliament. Emma explores Morrison, an adult with considerable power, getting in trouble from his peers due to bad behaviour.

Story 8 (excerpt)

I sprinted into the room, just as the doors slammed behind me. Everyone was shouting and screaming at me, I tried to ignore them. 'Scott Morrison, where have you been?' shouted the Speaker of the House, 'It doesn't matter!' I replied

This places a character with authority in a position typically expected of a child. This inverts 'normal' social dynamics. A humorous contrast is created between the expectations for a person in leadership versus their actual behaviour. Hence Emma plays an active role as corporate agent (Archer 2000) criticising Scott Morrison through irony, representing a familiar CEP in the Australian democracy of holding politicians to account.

6. Conclusion

The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC), published in 1989, calls for the child's freedom to express themselves 'in any way they choose, including by talking, drawing or writing'. With an ongoing tension between children's freedom and the school's structure (Puroila, Estola, and Syrjälä 2012), certain pedagogical practices can be used to enhance children's voices and choices. In this article, we showed the potential of writing as a space for elementary school children to exercise their agency. Further, we applied Archer's conceptualisation of agency to operationalise this concept in studies of written narratives. Our findings provide valuable insight into how children's agency is exerted through discourse (language choices), story (characterisation, and the sequences of events), and the themes or the significant messages communicated with readers.

We argue that narratives are particularly useful contexts for children's agency as they rest on the principles of children's play (Haas Dyson 2020), allowing children to create alternative selves embedded within alternative worlds. It can be through the creation of these alternatives that children practice their agency. For example, the stories explored in this paper include representations of alternative worlds that make visible the child's agency – and the way the individual characters are situated within context – irrespective of their age. Ages of the characters (for the stories that make it known to the reader) range from childhood (school-aged children) to adulthood. Stories 4, 5, 6, and 7 bring about a shift in power and position the child character as a problem solver, and the one with determination. In story 4– in the absence of adult characters – 'ice power' is introduced as the solution to all children's problems. In story 5, the adult characters are depicted through stereotypical images as controllers of the child's behaviour. Furthermore, although story 7 shows George's parents as central in his life, the depiction of their agency is constrained, focusing primarily on their companionship in George's journey. Lastly, Morgan's father is shown (story 6) as the active decision maker (e.g. not revealing information about the mother, and deciding to move) but is simultaneously demonstrated as incompetent and stereotyped as an unaffectionate father. This in turn positions the child as the critic of his father's decisions. Hence, in most cases, children's agency is highlighted along with their critical reflection on the situation.

The image of 'a child with agency' invites the adult reader to see children as active individuals, and collaborative decision makers within their environments. It contests the conventional views – with developmental orientation – that position the child as incapable (due to their age) and warns against classroom practices whereby children are regarded as incomplete humans acted upon by teachers (for a full review of conceptions of childhood please refer to Murriss 2016). However, following Archer (2012), emergent properties in any context can shape the decisions and actions of individuals. Cultural emergent properties (social norms and ideologies) are evident in shaping the gender portrayals in some of these stories. When looking across all characters (identifiable by gender), male characters are depicted in ways that emphasise gender-stereotypical norms. For example, the male characters are shown as knowledgeable (story 1), trouble maker (story 3), unaffectionate (story 6), rescuer (story 7), and clumsy (8).

Similarly, children's literature books have a long history of being criticised for their gendered subject positions (see Cutler and Lewis 2023; Cutler and Slicker 2020). Children's literature and the methods of read-alouds (structural emergent property) are increasingly used as early literacy practices and are acknowledged for their positive impact on children's literacy development. Research suggests that children's literature has the power to offer certain social identities to young readers (Barton and González 2023). With a lack of representation of diversity, inconsistent inclusion of underrepresented groups or gendered agency for protagonists in children's literature books (Cooperative Children's Book Center 2019), the potential impact of these books – as a teaching and learning resource – on children's texts, suggest more emphasis should be placed on children as critical readers of texts.

The implications of this study are profound for teacher pedagogy as an enabling condition for student agency through writing. First, choice of pedagogical strategies such as incorporation of students' voice into classroom discourse through approaches such as dialogic talk (Newman and Myhill 2016; Khosronejad et al. 2021) is well

documented and can enable agency as critical readers. Teachers' decisions about textual resources that depict agency for a wide variety of characters in different contexts can support these critical conversations (Barton and González 2023). We show through our findings that some of these representations of agency, such as gendered norms and the discourse technique of *deus ex machina* as a 'lazy solution' to a challenge, warrant dialogic talk in the classroom. Dialogic talk can draw in cultural emergent properties of socio-cultural, political and historical ideologies that children invoke in their stories so they can understand how their language represents their characters and ideas in particular ways. These dialogic opportunities were not necessarily taken up by teachers in this study, which seemed a lost opportunity to enable critical self-awareness of agency. We argue that the writing classroom is an important space to enable students' exploration of corporate agency or the role of social actor. Providing choice in written tasks can be framed around how students' decisions portray representations of self and others in their texts. In addition, it seems imperative that feedback given on student's writing should not only focus on technical skills of writing, but also on the function of language and structure in more intentional agentic representation of ideas, characters, and self.

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