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Agile Agency: Applying its Three Principles to Calibrate Adult Lenses While Supporting Young Children's Spontaneous Agency

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ABSTRACT

In this paper, I introduce the concept of '*agile agency*' in children. 'Agile agency' is characterised by its non-linear fluidity that traverses along a sliding scale that is akin to an *agency barometer*. Its changes in magnitude and nature are responses to contextual factors that may be relational, environmental, and temporal. Using the case study of a four-year-old girl pseudonymised as Sophia from my doctoral research on 3–5-year-old children-led play at home and two London nurseries, I posit the following three principles of 'agile agency'. Firstly, a child's agency is agile as it oscillates along a sliding scale, and it adapts in nature and degree in response to shifts in the immediate environment and to contextual shifts over longer periods of time. As per the second principle, agile agency is interpreted differently when filtered through the role-driven socio-cultural lenses of teachers, parents, and researchers. The third principle asserts that the interpretation of a child's agency is not only varied between different adults' lenses but also within an individual adults' viewpoint. Such fluctuations in an individual's viewpoint can result from shifts in contexts that may be physical, relational, and temporal. As child-initiated play is a vital part of the everyday life in early childhood, Sophia's case study serves as a rich context for examining how children's complex agency unfolds within enabling and restricting environments facilitated by adults. In doing so, the paper proposes broader theoretical generalisability of the three principles as a framework to accommodate agile agency's variability and complexity, and inform how adults working with children in various capacities can better understand and support their complex, and often rapidly changing spontaneous agency.

1 | Introduction

A growing body of literature supports that working with children in pedagogic settings as teachers, at home as parents, and in research contexts as researchers requires an understanding of how adults' practices enhance and restrict children's complex agency in their everyday lives (Beaton et al. 2024; Kucirkova and Grøver 2024; and Kokko et al. 2024). This paper contributes to this field by answering the research question: how might we recalibrate our adult lenses to avoid marginalising children's diverse and dynamic agency that deviate from, transgress, and even defy adult expectations, and instead acknowledge the non-linear fluidity, multiplicities, contradictions, and spontaneity of children's complex agency? In doing so, it proposes broader theoretical generalisability of the three principles of agile agency as a framework for adults playing various roles in shaping children's agency in their everyday lives.

Addressing this, I introduce the concept of '*agile agency*'. A child's agile agency is one that shifts in nature and degree as it oscillates in a non-linear manner along a sliding scale that can be conceived of as an *agency barometer*. I conceive such shifts to be caused by

constricting and enabling contextual factors. I have developed this concept by building on Bordonaro and Payne's (2012) argument that children's actions that challenge dominant adult and/or western perspectives, be conceptualised as 'ambiguous agency' rather than being categorised as undesirable agency or absence of agency (p.365). I also draw on the idea that adults' varying socio-cultural lenses driven by their unique agendas lead to different interpretations of children's agency (Bligh 2011). By doing so, I respond to (Abebe (2019), 81) call for 'multiple and often contradictory concepts of agency' as they discuss 'a framework for reconceptualising it as a continuum, and as interdependent'; a call that is influenced heavily by Robson et al. (2007) whose work I examine further in the literature review. While I support Bordonaro and Payne's (2012) call to recognise as agency those acts by children that defy adult and dominant agenda, I argue that the term 'ambiguous' in its widely accepted meaning, is restrictive as it imposes a sense of uncertainty and fails to consider that children's agency can vary in nature and strength depending on the context within which it is exercised by children and facilitated by adults (Kucirkova et al. 2023; Cavazzoni et al. 2021). Furthermore, it does not acknowledge that children's agency within a particular context may be assigned varying meanings when viewed through different socio-cultural adult lenses (Bligh 2011). In response to such limitations in the existing literature, I posit the following 3 principles of agile agency: (1) a child's agency is agile in the way it oscillates in a non-linear manner along a barometer as it varies in nature and degree in response to changing contexts. (2) A child's agile agency at any given time is assigned different meanings by adults in varying roles (such as teachers, parents, and researchers) who view the child through their respective socio-culturally filtered lenses. (3) The tensions are not limited between the lenses through which different adults view children's agile agency, but that even within an individual adult's lens, they can be conflicted in how they perceive a child agency contextually (i.e., in relation to physical environments), relationally (i.e., in relationship to others such as peers and adults), and temporally (i.e., by varying over time) (Figure 1).

I present the case study of a child pseudonymised Sophia (aged 4 at the time) from my doctoral research where I examined 3–5-year-old children's self-initiated play at home and in 2 state-maintained nurseries in London. I analyse data that represents how Sophia's teacher Ms. Smith, mother Sarah, and I in my researcher role interpreted her play through our respective adult lenses. Given that child-initiated play is a vital part of everyday life in early childhood, it serves as a rich context for examining how children's complex and dynamic agency unfolds within enabling and restricting environments facilitated by adults. Through the microanalysis of interactions during and about Sophia's play, I critically discuss my stance on 'agile agency' and demonstrate how these 3 principles of 'agile agency' might enable adults working with children in different capacities to appropriately interpret and respond to the non-linear fluidity, multiplicities, contradictions, and messiness of children's complex agency.

In the literature review, I clarify the concepts of 'agency' and 'structure' within this study's framework, discussing how scholarly works informed my conceptualisation of 'agile agency' and its three principles. The methodology section outlines the data collection methods, ethical considerations, and the rationale behind selecting and analysing Sophia's case. The findings are presented through data excerpts, followed by a discussion on the broader implications for practice. Here I draw links to the literature to situate my position on 'agile agency' within the existing field and argue for the integration of the three agile agency principles into adult perspectives. In doing so, I propose theoretical generalisability by advancing understanding of the three principles of agile agency as they inform theories on children's agency across diverse contexts.

2 | Literature Review

Here I define 'agency' and 'structure' within this study's framework, discussing how literature informed my conceptualisation of 'agile agency' and its three principles.

Agile agency barometer
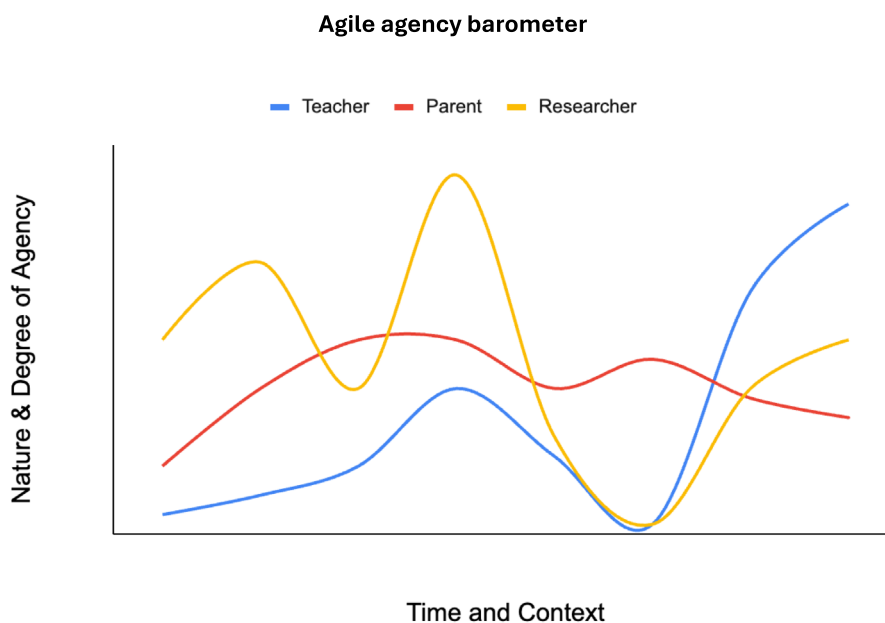
FIGURE 1 | Different adult perspectives represented on the agile agency barometer. [Colour figure can be viewed at wileyonlinelibrary.com]

In my research, grounded in the progressive 'new sociology of childhood', I consider children's narratives about their experiences as credible and pivotal. Through this lens, children's perspectives emerge as genuine and invaluable (James and James 2004; United Nations 1989; Corsaro and Everitt 2023; Prout and James 2015). Initially, I clarify what 'agency' and 'structure' mean in the context of this study. I adopt Rigby et al.'s (2016) understanding of 'agency' that is 'situated practices, or the temporal capacity of individuals to take actions' (Rigby et al. 2016, 295). This definition draws on Archer (1996) and Meyer and Jepperson (2002), who link the concepts of 'agency' and 'structure'. Giddens (1979) defines structures as 'rules and resources' (p.64) that define how we 'understand, how things should be done (; and) practices organised around those understandings'; and suggests that these structures are contextual factors that can 'enable' and/or 'constrict individuals' 'actions' (Rigby et al. 2016, 295). I choose these definitions to set the parameters within which I position 'agile agency' as they provide opportunities to demonstrate the temporality and variability in children's agency. It is this fluidity in agency that encapsulates the agility in the actions that children take in their environments, such as homes and nurseries, where they navigate through and negotiate the rules and resources that are the structures that adults establish, driven by their diverse intentions (Farini and Scollan 2023).

The paradigmatic shift of the 'new sociology of childhood' has not gone unchallenged (Canosa and Graham 2020; Gu 2022; Jones et al. 2020; Lundy et al. 2024; Robb 2023). Robb (2023) and Tisdall and Punch (2012) criticise the tendency 'within childhood studies', to depict an image of children...(as) competent social actors... (Tisdall and Punch 2012, 12) as though they express agency only in ways sanctioned by adults. These authors argue that in reality, children's agency can be messy and contradictory to adult agendas. Such messiness is elucidated by Robb (2023, 557) who went into their study with children 'hoping to get some positive insights into the topic' of visual art and museums, but instead, encountered a child named Melissa's 'resistance and lack of interest in the topic' as she reflected on museum trips with 'opinions generally expressed in the negative' and used the word '*boring*' ... 'as the equivalent of a full-stop in the discussion' (ibid, p.557). In a similar vein, Baraldi and Cockburn (2018, 9) argue that children's agency is a form of 'transformative' 'participation' that brings about social change by disrupting the status quo. As such, unconventional expressions of agency that challenge adult agendas are recognised as valid in agile agency. Having established that children's agile agency can contradict adults' perspective, I now delve into explaining its fluidity.

In explaining non-linear fluidity, I discuss the subtler yet significant ideas within the literature that collectively shaped my formulation of 'agile agency'. I have established that I view children's choices as agentic irrespective of whether they conform to adult expectations or provoke discomfort in us. To this end, I attribute 'agile agency' with variability in both 'nature' and 'degree' (Robson et al. 2007; and Jerome and Starkey 2022). 'Degree' refers to the extent or magnitude of agency children can exercise, and this can fluctuate depending on the physical environment, adult expectations and rules, and the child's social relationships. 'Nature' refers to the type

or form of agency children display. It encapsulates the qualities of the actions taken by children. For instance, the nature can be negotiated where children balance their choices within parameters set by others, and it can be resistant when children challenge adult-set conventions. What causes shifts in agency's degree and nature, to render it agile? Klocker (2007) posits that contextual factors act either as facilitators or impediments to children's agency, leading not to a binary outcome of agency's presence or absence but rather to its 'thickening' and 'thinning'. In Klocker (2007), 'thin' agency refers to children's decisions made in their everyday lives within situations that allow 'limited flexibility' and few 'feasible alternatives' (p.85). In contrast, 'thick' agency is applied when they 'hav(ing)e the latitude to act within a broad range of options' (p.85). Keeping with this view, I adopt Hutchby and Moran-Ellis' (1998) view of 'children's competence' as 'a constantly negotiated dynamic, a phenomenon which is stabilised, to greater or lesser degrees, in and through the interactions between human actors and the material and cultural resources which are available' (p.15). To this, I add Robson et al.'s (2007) key argument that even in the most constricting circumstances, children's agency is never wholly absent. The authors suggest terms such as '(almost) no agency', 'little agency', 'secret agency' and 'public agency' along a 'continuum of agency' to indicate the degree/magnitude and type of agency (p.144). While I do not use Robson et al.'s (2007) terminologies along the continuum, I do conceive of children's agile agency to be traversing along a sliding scale as contextual factors such as tacit and explicit rules, social interactions, and relationship have 'layering' and 'eroding' impacts (Klocker 2007, 85). More recently, Abebe (2019, 81) examined these typologies of agency and called for a framework that acknowledges 'multiple and often contradictory concepts of agency' 're-conceptualising it as a continuum, and as interdependent'. This paper is my response to this call to 'reveal the contexts and relational processes within which' children's 'everyday' agile 'agency unfolds' as it oscillates back and forth along the agency barometer fluctuating in nature and degree (Abebe 2019, 81).

Will a teacher, a parent and a researcher have the same interpretation of a child's agency in a specific circumstance? Bligh (2011) suggests that there is need to critically introspect on our adult lenses that have filters of our past, present, and socio-cultural identities. Such perspective is central in Wohlwend et al.'s (2022) discussion of the meanings attached from teachers' perspectives to bilingual children's practice of 'silence' in the initial stages of their preschool play. To interpret and respond to such silence by children who experience linguistic challenges in English-dominant classrooms, the teachers need to examine their own socio-cultural lenses and check their own biases. In a slightly different vein, MacDougall (2020) draws on Bligh (2011) to highlight that inadequate time to understand and respond to rapidly changing pedagogic practices due to factors external to teachers' personal identities such as school ethos and policies, can cause practitioners to feel disempowered in supporting young bilingual children's diverse needs. I draw on Bligh (2011) here to stress that what is expected of children in one culture can differ from notions in other cultures. This can lead to teachers in different cultural contexts interpreting the same behaviour in children, differently (Bligh 2011; Liebel 2020). Heikka

et al. ([2022](#), 2223) draw on Markström and Halldén's ([2009](#)) idea to investigate 'educators' commitments to 'enhancing children's participation in' early childhood 'pedagogical practices'. The findings 'indicate that the level of participation … was highest in play and limited in terms of time and effect in other pedagogical … activities' (Heikka et al. [2022](#), 2223). Here, I draw further on Baraldi's ([2023](#), 18) work, which emphasises that children's agency must be analysed within the framework of 'specific social conditions'. Baraldi ([2023](#), 18) highlights that the 'hierarchical generational order', particularly prevalent in 'educational systems', establishes 'structural constraints' while simultaneously shaping how children's agency is evaluated and navigated within these settings. Such evidence strengthens the call for critical reflection on how rapidly changing early childhood contexts where myriad implicit and explicit rules imposed by adults operate, can bring high levels of variability in children's agency. I apply such criticality in examining my thinking about children's behaviours such as silence when adults expect them to speak, and their withdrawal from activities designed and encouraged by adults, even when that includes children's withdrawal from my own research.

Next, I draw attention to the agility in adults' interpretation of a child's agency. While recognising the tensions in how agency is viewed and understood is essential, it is unhelpful to present adults' interpretation of it as static. In this paper, I argue that tensions are not limited between the lenses through which different adults view children's agile agency, but that even within an individual adult's lens, they can be conflicted in how they perceive a child's agency relationally (i.e., in relationship to others such as peers and adults) and temporally (i.e., by varying over time).

In examining the culturally inclusive dimension of agile agency and its fluidity above, I adopted a macro perspective to explore its implications within broader social processes. Here, I emphasise the importance of microanalysis in understanding agile agency, given its rapidly shifting nature, necessitating a more granular level examination of interactions in play encounters and related conversations. Wood ([2014](#)) recurs in literature that champions 'a culturally inclusive view of agency' much like my stance (Baker et al. [2023](#), 372; Bodrova et al. [2023](#)). However, in this paper, Wood's ([2014](#)) microanalysis of children's play is what is pivotal to my positioning of 'agile agency'. Following in the footsteps of Köngäs et al. ([2022](#)), who employ Wood's ([2014](#)) method of microanalysis to delve into the subtleties of children's social strategies in early childhood settings, I too apply microanalysis to elucidate the nuanced manifestations of agile agency in Sophia's interactions. Through detailed scrutiny of social exchanges and behaviours, I explore how Sophia negotiates her place in her social world, analysing both her spoken and unspoken engagements with her peers and adults, including her teacher, parents (according to her mother's account), and myself as a researcher. In micro-analysing the deeply descriptive interactions during play and in the accounts of play from adult perspectives, much like Tisdall et al. ([2023](#)), I advocate for adults working with children to use 'transformative praxis' 'as they (will) bring their own previous experiences' in their iterative and critical reading of Sophia's case study (p.4). Here, by

'transformative praxis,' I mean a process of reflection and action that fosters change both in individual practice and within the broader structures in which we as adults operate.

3 | Methodology

Here, I discuss the sampling approach, methods of data collection, ethical considerations, steps taken to establish trustworthiness and reliability, my rationale for selecting Sophia's case study, and my approach to its presentation and analysis.

3.1 | Overview of the Study

Using a combination of convenience and purposive sampling, I reached out to the headteachers of 20 conveniently located nearby London nurseries via email, gaining access to conduct my research in two of them (Obilor [2023](#)). I engaged with parents directly during pick-up and drop-off times to distribute information sheets and gather consent for their and their children's participation. Although I originally sought a diverse purposive sample in terms of sex and ethnicity of 20 children, the 18 consent forms I received made further selection unnecessary (Etikan et al. [2016](#)). Data collection took place between January and July 2016.

After securing parental consent, I then sought the children's provisional consent to participate, which I detail in the ethical considerations section. I invited 9 children from each nursery to engage in participatory research by using all resources that were available within the nursery provision, such as arts and crafts materials and playing blocks, and the shockproof digital cameras that I provided. With such tools, the children set their own research agenda and decided what they wanted to tell me about their play. By using multiple modes of communication, such as their arts and crafts and photographs, and shared talk with me, the children attached meaning to the artefacts they created to represent their play.

While engaging in the collaborative and interactive process of participatory research, the children used wide-ranging resources to communicate about their play using the tools that they felt most comfortable with (Clark and Moss [2011](#); and Creswell and Poth [2017](#)). To develop each child's case study, I collated their insights into their play with my notes from the 6 h of observations (1×6 months), and my semi-structured in-depth interviews with their parent and teacher. In this, the child's perspective remained central, with adult viewpoints offering additional insights into each child's play through different lenses.

3.2 | Ethical Considerations

This research was developed in line with BERA ([2011](#)) and approved by the ethics committee at IOE, UCL's Faculty of Education and Society, where I undertook my doctoral study. All individuals and institutions were pseudonymised to protect their privacy. All visual data, such as photographs, were smudged using software to make individuals unidentifiable.

I sought the children's informed consent regularly before commencing each observation, utilising child-friendly language such as short and easy to understand sentences, and activities such as indicating their consent and dissent through mark making of their choice such as drawing 'smileys' in columns labelled 'yes' and 'no' (Flewitt 2005). This process underscored the children's autonomy in the research, empowering them with the choice to participate, withdraw, or re-join the study at any point (El Gemayel and Salema 2023). When non-participant children featured in the data, I sought their verbal consent and confined the focus of my write-up to the participating child.

To establish my non-teaching role, I introduced myself as a 'researcher' studying how children play and avoided typical teacher behaviours, such as reprimanding children for taking indoor toys outside, further differentiating my position (El Gemayel and Salema 2023).

To enhance trustworthiness and reliability, I used 'thick descriptions', which improve the 'transferability of qualitative…' findings… 'to other contexts' (Younas et al. 2023, 1). Keeping a 'reflexive' diary strengthened 'trustworthiness' (Ritter et al. 2023, 5880), and I employed respondent validation by asking children from time to time, 'What's happening here?' to let them assign meaning to their play (Creswell and Miller 2000).

Throughout the study, I used tentative language to acknowledge uncertainties in aligning my interpretations with the children's perspectives. While my claims were informed by months of sustained contact, this approach enhanced the trustworthiness of the findings by recognising their potential contestability.

3.2.1 | My Approach to Selecting, Presenting and Analysing Sophia's Case Study

I adopt Deetz's (1996) ontological position of interpretivism, 'embracing the idea of multiple realities' (Creswell and Poth 2017, 20) to examine how I, Sophia's mother Sarah, and her teacher Ms. Smith interpreted Sophia's child-initiated play. This case study explores our adult perspectives, assigning varying meanings to her agency in specific play moments and over time. From an epistemological standpoint, I assume that knowledge of Sophia's free play emerges through our 'subjective experiences', her mother and teacher observing her daily play, and me as a researcher accompanying her during nursery playtime (Creswell and Poth 2017, 21).

Out of the 18 children, I selected Sophia's case as it highlighted the fluidity of her agency in play, which defied a single definition. Sophia's parents, of second-generation British-Bangladeshi heritage, include her father, a teacher, and her mother, a medical diagnostic technician. Teachers took a more liberal approach with Sophia, allowing privileges such as her parents carrying her into the nursery and placing her on the carpet, unlike other parents who dropped their children at the door. Ms. Smith would often greet Sophia with her comfort teddy upon arrival. In her interview, Sophia's mother, Sarah, described herself as a

'hands-on mum' and 'quite protective', noting that Sophia was an IVF baby. Between January and July, I observed Sophia's agency manifesting in diverse ways and degrees through my researcher lens.

In selecting extracts from Sophia's case study, I used Clark's (2017) 'layered' approach to explore how her agency in play was interpreted through parent, teacher, and researcher lenses. While the main study centred on data from children, this paper focuses on adult perspectives, drawing on 4 excerpts representing these views. Deep descriptions provide vivid vignettes of research events and ground claims in evidence (Hall and Liebenberg 2024). It might be argued that the focus here on a single case study, despite the broader study including multiple children, limits data variability and additional cases would have strengthened theoretical generalisability. Future publications will address this. In the main study, Braun et al.'s (2022) thematic analysis was used, with this paper emphasising two levels of observation: my reflections on Sophia's play and research engagement, and how adults interpreted her play behaviour.

4 | Analysis Of Sophia's Case Study, Theoretical Generalisability and Implications for Practice

The following extracts illustrate the agility of Sophia's agency over time. They include my reflections on her play and research engagement, as well as my interpretation of how Sophia's teacher, Ms. Smith, and her mother, Sarah, perceived her agency.

4.1 | Excerpt 1: My Playtime Observations in January

When I invited Sophia to join the research, she said '*yes*' in her soft voice and nodded. She drew a smiley in the column labelled 'yes' in my notebook to express consent. As she sat down on Ms. Smith's carpet, Sophia gently gathered the hem of her pinafore. Tilting her head slightly, Sophia looked at me and said in a mild voice, '*I want to sit and rest*'. I asked, '*shall I leave you, or would you like me to stay?*' With a reassuring smile, a single nod and a slow blink, she said '*Stay*'.

Resting her chin on her hand, Sophia leaned forward as her elbow sank into her lap. She began to silently observe a couple of her peers play with foam number mats nearby. I sought their consent verbally explaining that I was observing Sophia's play nearby. Moments later Ms. Smith emerged from the office. Walking past us, she asked me '*any luck? Were you able to do any activities with her or has she just been sitting there doing nothing?*' I smiled to cloak my slight cringe in response and replied, '*we're ok*'.

About 20 min or so into observing Sophia, I felt pins and needles from sitting on my legs on the carpet. I shifted from the carpet to Ms. Smith's chair which I instantly regretted. I had only ever seen Ms. Smith sit here during circle time, and although at playtime the children played around it, they never sat on it. Until this moment, I had intentionally avoided sitting on the teacher's chair as part of my carefully curated behavioural repertoire to differentiate myself from the teachers. My non-teacher-like

behaviour entailed following children's lead and avoiding taking a directive stance that was common in the predominant adult-child relationships in the nursery.

Sophia stood up. While walking towards me, she said *'I want to sit on the chair'*. I sprung up to immediately vacate the chair for Sophia, rather relieved hearing her authoritative instruction instead of a request. The children who had been engrossed by the number mats all this while took notice of Sophia and me swapping places. With raised brows and widened eyes, they abandoned the mats and rushed towards us as though they were enthralled by the possibilities that having such new access to a teacher's chair presented.

There was chatter between the two boys as they both grabbed the arms of the chair, first stepping precariously on the thin wooden ledge around the blue cushioned seat, and then pulling themselves up and rapidly encroaching onto the cushioned part where there was plenty of room around Sophia's tiny body. No words were exchanged between them and Sophia. With their knees bent, the boys pulled up higher, getting closer and closer to Sophia. Eventually, they climbed over the armrest, planting both their feet firmly on the seat. Soon, they were standing on the chair next to Sophia. Without retaliation, Sophia got up and scurried to sit back on the carpet a few feet away from Ms. Smith's chair, from where she observed the children who had taken the chair over from her.

4.2 | Excerpt 2: My Playtime Observations in March

I accompanied Sophia down the hallway where she stopped to observe Ms. Main speak with a colleague in the kitchen as she stood in the doorway holding the door open. Ms. Main looked at Sophia and asked in a warm tone of endearment *'want to do some drawing on the board?'* Sophia smiled and nodded as she followed Ms. Main over to Ms. Khan's carpet. Ms. Main tore 3 to 4 sheets from the flip chart pad and grabbed markers in a variety of colours from the thin shelf at the bottom of Ms. Khan's flip chart easel. As Ms. Main laid the supplies on to the carpet, Sophia got down on her knees positioning herself in front of one of the sheets. Marianne and Lisa (two children that I had frequently observed Sophia play with) sat down taking up space in front of the other two sheets as though they had just claimed them. I reminded Marianne and Lisa that I was observing Sophia and secured their verbal consent to observe them while they drew together.

Sophia promptly oriented the paper horizontally and put pen to paper, without needing time to think about what she was going to draw. She drew a curve creating a half circle. Then she used another colour to draw a second curve, and then a third. Soon for me, Sophia's equidistant curves began to resemble a rainbow.

The children were on their elbows and knees, with their bodies partially resting on the sheets. In between drawing each curve, Sophia tilted her head, stealing glances at Marianne and Lisa's drawings.

Upon finishing the third curve, Sophia looked at the several markers that barely fit her tiny but tight looking fisted grasp and rotated her fist with an intent gaze. She then said to Lisa: *'Lisa, I'm using all of them now'*. Without Lisa asking for it, Sophia handed her a marker and said *'I'm gonna keep the green one'*. Sophia coloured, and from time to time looked out the window covered in raindrops, onto the green turf. She then turned to Marianne and said, *'Marianne, I do love drawing'*.

4.3 | Excerpt 3: My Child-Conference With Sophia in June

In June, during a child-conference, Sophia consented to participate by drawing a smiley in the 'yes' column. She said, *'We're going to the house,'* which I interpreted as a signal that Marianne, who was with Sophia at the time, would also join the activity. I promptly sought verbal consent from Marianne to include her in my observation notes.

The play kitchen had three walls, with the fourth side open, allowing a view inside. I noticed that Sophia was fully immersed in role-play, as she intentionally walked around the corner and entered through the kitchen door instead of the open side, with Marianne and I following her lead. Once inside, Sophia quickly embraced Marianne's idea and led us to Ms. Khan's carpet where the costumes were displayed. They dressed up as Belle and Snow White, and invited me to choose a costume. I initially declined, noting that the costumes would not fit me, but Sophia insisted and handed me one. I attempted to fit my arm through a sleeve, which confirmed that the costume was too small. Sophia accepted this and then led us all back to the kitchen, where we once again entered through the door.

As we sat at the dining table, Sophia suggested, *'We can do questions!'* indicating her readiness to begin the child-conference, which we conducted while pretending to enjoy tea and snacks. After answering a few questions, Sophia gestured towards Marianne and said, *'it's Marianne's turn to talk to you.'* Unsure if Sophia was trying to shift the focus, I clarified by reminding her that we could stop at any time and that I would be happy to leave her to play with Marianne. Sophia reassured me, saying, *'no, stay,'* and then pointed to Marianne, insisting, *'Ask Marianne.'* Marianne playfully responded to my questions.

4.4 | Excerpt 4: My Perception in May of Sarah's Interpretation of Sophia's Agile Agency

Sarah said (in an impassioned tone): *She... very rarely plays by herself. She's got this, I don't wanna call it fear. But right now she's going through this phase where if I'm not in the same room as her, she'll follow me around. So if I'm in the kitchen, then she'll bring all her toys and she'll sit near the passage, near the kitchen and she'll sit and play and watch me...*

She, she can be a bit aggressive at times. I find that, I say that, but then when she's with kids her own age, she, they take a toy off her, she won't challenge them. Even if she's playing with it, she will just let it be. She will walk away from the situation rather than ask for

it back. But if it's me and her father that's playing, she will snatch it back from us, or she will ask for it back.

4.5 | The First Principle

Using the first principle of agile agency, I examine how Sophia's agency oscillates non-linearly along the agency barometer. In Extract 1, Sophia initially demonstrated strong agency by explicitly expressing her desire for me to stay while she rested and silently observed her peers. Here, I interpret this choice, which Ms. Smith regarded as undesirable, as a form of 'transformative' 'participation' that disrupted the expected behaviour deemed by teachers as the norm (Baraldi and Cockburn 2018, 9). To me, Sophia's relational agency rose up the barometer and thickened when she asked me to vacate Ms. Smith's chair, demonstrating subtle assertiveness with me. However, her agency thinned while sliding down the barometer moments later, when she let her peers take over the chair without retaliation. Here, the oscillation of Sophia's agency is relational to her peers and me, interlinked with structural rules in the nursery around children's access to physical objects (Klocker 2007).

In Extract 2, Ms. Main's novelty material resources such as markers and flip-chart paper were environmental elements that thickened Sophia's agency. Here, she used them as capital and adapted to the unannounced arrival of Marianne and Lisa during a drawing activity, two peers she had been striving to connect with over time (Salema 2020). Through verbal and body language, she asserted her position and maintained the collaborative drawing activity. This reflected a growth in her ability to leverage her special access to teachers' resources in navigating peer interactions, illustrating a development in her relational agency with her classmates (Robson et al. 2007).

Extract 3 illustrates Sophia's spontaneous agency. It thickened as Sophia first included Marianne in our research, and then purposefully led us into the play kitchen through the door, asserting her imaginative agency. Sophia's agency rose further up the barometer when, upon our arrival, she immediately adapted the agenda to accommodate Marianne's suggestion and ushered us to the costumes. Her insistence on including me in the role-play by offering a costume, despite its impracticality, showcased her growing confidence in decision-making regarding physical play resources and exercising thick agency in our adult-child research relationship. Sophia's ability to resume the play episode in the kitchen and to nest our research into it by *'do(ing) questions'* with Marianne highlights her newfound adeptness at balancing negotiated agency, aligning with (Hutchby and Moran-Ellis (1998), 15) view of agency as 'dynamically' 'co-constructed'. Sophia's social navigation skills in this context reflect a sophisticated interplay between individual and shared agency. My facilitative role as a researcher, the autonomy provided by the free play provision in terms of environmental elements such as rules and physical resources, and Sophia's evolving relationship with Marianne served as 'layering' enablers that 'thickened' her agency (Klocker 2007, 85). This analysis demonstrates the application of the first principle in capturing the fluid and context-sensitive nature of agile agency, demonstrating how it is shaped by relational, material, and social factors.

4.6 | The Second Principle

As a learning outcomes-focused teacher and a researcher observing child-initiated play, Ms. Smith and I assigned differing meanings to Sophia's agency when she chose to sit silently and observe her peers in Extract 1 (Bligh 2011; Jerome and Starkey 2022). The second principle of agile agency is instrumental in exploring the tensions between our interpretations. From my perspective as a researcher, unbound by the accountability structures that guide educators, I interpreted Sophia's silent observation as an agentic choice, thickened by my behaviour as a non-teacher who avoided directing her (Klocker 2007). In contrast, Ms. Smith, constrained by the 'discourse of quality' (Ball 2003:217), perceived her as disengaged. My insider-outsider lens, gained through a year of volunteering at the nursery followed by 6 months of data collection, allowed me to recognise that even during seemingly chaotic free play, teachers were subtly steering activities towards learning outcomes while balancing administrative duties. So, it might be argued that Ms. Smith, juggling multiple responsibilities, interpreted Sophia's lack of overt engagement during our silent research engagement as 'doing nothing'. This contrast underscores the ways in which sociocultural roles shape our interpretations of agency (Bligh 2011; Liebel 2020). Reflecting on my background as a former early years practitioner, I realise that my interpretation at the time would likely have aligned with Ms. Smith's perspective. This reflection underscores how our past experiences, socio-cultural identities, and professional priorities shape the lenses through which we understand agency (Wohlwend et al.'s 2022). Using the second principle of agile agency, I call upon teachers and other adults playing dominant roles in children's everyday lives to critically examine these biases and reflect on how their lenses influence their judgements (Wohlwend et al. 2022). Furthermore, MacDougall's (2020) work points to the 'structural constraints' that limit teachers' capacity to fully engage with children's actions. In Ms. Smith's case, the pressures of administrative work and fleeting observations shaped her expectations of Sophia during child-directed time. Had she had more time to pause and observe, her expectations might have differed from those during structured activities, where more explicit forms of engagement such as adult-child verbal interaction are anticipated instead of silent observations of other children. By applying this principle, teachers can step outside the structural constraints that shape their evaluations of children's agency that is agile (Heikka et al. 2022).

4.7 | The Third Principle

The third principle of agile agency enables us to move beyond the assumption that an adult's interpretation of a child's agency is static. By adopting a granular approach of play-related conversation suggested by Wood (2014), I analyse Sarah's reflections and highlight how the third principle enables us to reframe and navigate contradictions and shifts in

her understanding of Sophia's agency. This principle provides a framework to reconcile the perceived inconsistencies that Sarah seems self-conscious of and, instead, frames them as nuanced, context-bound interpretations of Sophia's agency. These nuanced variations in Sarah's perception, I argue, are shaped by her socio-cultural perspective and her identity as Sophia's mother who is 'protective' and 'hands-on-mum' (Bligh 2011; Liebel 2020; Wohlwend et al.'s 2022).

During her interview, Sarah reflected deeply on Sophia's play, often voicing her internal conflicts. For example, Sarah hesitated to attribute Sophia's solitary play to fear, stating, '*I don't want to call it fear*'. However, when Sophia engaged in parallel play by re-locating her toys near Sarah while she completed chores, Sarah interpreted this behaviour as rooted in fear. Yet, Sarah immediately qualified this assumption by describing Sophia as 'going through a phase', implying the behaviour was temporary. Sarah's interpretation extended into Sophia's interactions with peers, where she perceived continuity in what she saw as diminished or thinned agency (Klocker 2007). She expressed frustration at Sophia's reluctance to challenge peers who snatched her toys during collaborative play. Sarah did not view Sophia's approach as a deliberate choice to preserve play interactions or as an act of conscious understanding or forgiveness. Instead, she saw it as passivity and eroding agency, which elicited her frustration (Klocker 2007, 85).

In contrast, when Sophia boldly reclaimed her toys from her parents during collaborative play, Sarah described this behaviour as 'aggressive' a term carrying negative connotations (Bordonaro and Payne 2012; Robson et al. 2007). This suggests Sarah perceived Sophia's agency as more thickened, although undesirable in interactions with adults but reduced or 'thinned' in peer interactions, demonstrating the dynamic nature of her interpretation (Klocker 2007). While Sarah's tone in the interview conveyed frustration at her seemingly contradictory views, her sensitivity to Sophia's shifting relational agency in different contexts becomes evident. Rather than simplifying her expectations into binary categories of whether or not Sophia should be agentic, Sarah seemed to desire different forms of agency depending on the social context. It might be argued that she wanted Sophia to exhibit cooperation and negotiated agency with adults while demonstrating assertiveness and strategic agency with peers (Robson et al. 2007). This is where the third principle of agile agency proves invaluable. It provides a lens to interpret and reconcile these shifting expectations, helping adults articulate their own changing and complex interpretation of children's agency manifested in 'specific social conditions' (Baraldi 2023, 8).

This paper contributes to the theoretical discourse on children's agency by responding to Abebe's (2019) call for frameworks that accommodate its variability and complexity. The principles of agile agency developed here offer a transferable framework that has broader applicability as it enables researchers, practitioners and parents who predominantly hold positions of power in their respective contexts to critically examine their socio-cultural interpretive lenses. Children's agency globally, as this research demonstrates, is neither static nor unidirectional; it oscillates non-linearly along a scale in response to the everyday and moment to moment constraining and enabling factors imposed by adults. How we facilitate environments and interpret agency is inevitably shaped by our own agendas. Thus, it is imperative to reflect on our positionality and individual interpretive lenses within adult-child relationships and specific contexts. Thus, the 3 principles of agile agency is a theoretical framework for critical introspection that allows us to actively 'thicken' children's agency across research, home, and educational settings, fostering environments that empower them and strengthen their relational capacity.

Disclosure

All peer-reviewed literature is referenced appropriately. Only primary data collected for the study is presented. No secondary data is presented in this paper.

Ethics Statement

The study presented in this article was reviewed and approved by the UCL Institute of Education Internal Ethics Committee.

Consent

No patients were involved. Informed consent was sought from all individuals featured in the paper.

Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest.

Data Availability Statement

Qualitative research data are not shared to protect the confidentiality of participants' identities.

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