Received: 21 February 2025 | Accepted: 17 April 2025

DOI: 10.1002/berj.4182

ORIGINAL ARTICLE

BERJ BERA

Children's agency in England's primary schools: A case for structured freedom

Yana Manyukhina

UCL Institute of Education, University College London, London, UK

Correspondence
Yana Manyukhina, UCL Institute of Education, University College London, 453 Devon Mansions, London SE1 2XJ, UK.
Email: y.manyukhina@ucl.ac.uk

Funding information
Leverhulme Trust

Abstract

This paper examines how children's agency operates within primary education in England through an in-depth qualitative study of three contrasting schools over two years. While children's right to participate in decisions affecting their education is increasingly recognised internationally, its practical implementation within formal education systems remains challenging. Drawing on critical realism and extensive empirical evidence, including classroom observations, interviews with school leadership and teachers, and innovative participatory methods capturing children's own voices, this study reveals how different institutional approaches create varying opportunities for children's agency. Through analysing structural conditions, daily practices, and children's experiences across two academic years, the research demonstrates how agency emerges through complex interactions between educational structures and children's lived experiences. The findings reveal that supporting children's agency does not require choosing between agency and structure; rather, thoughtfully designed structures can enable meaningful participation while maintaining educational standards. The paper presents the concept of 'structured freedom'—a practical framework for systematically supporting children's agency through four key principles: three-domain integration, choice architecture, systematic mechanisms for agency, and experiential development. This study offers both theoretical insights into how children's agency operates within educational structures and practical guidance

for schools navigating the tensions between enabling children's agency and meeting standardised requirements.

KEYWORDS
children's agency, critical realism, primary education, structured freedom

Key insights

What is the main issue that the paper addresses?

This paper examines how schools can support children's agency within standardised education systems by analysing how different structural conditions and institutional approaches create varying opportunities for agency—showing that the challenge lies not in whether to support agency but in how to design enabling structures.

What are the main insights that the paper provides?

Through comparing three schools' approaches, the research demonstrates that children's agency can be systematically supported through thoughtfully designed educational structures. The concept of 'structured freedom' was created to identify key principles for systematically enabling agency while maintaining educational standards.

INTRODUCTION

The role of children's agency in education represents a fundamental issue in contemporary schooling. While children's right to participate in decisions affecting their education has been recognised internationally (United Nations General Assembly, 1989) and is gaining increasing attention through frameworks like the OECD's Learning Compass (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, 2018), its practical implementation within formal education systems remains under-realised. In this paper, we[1] understand children's agency in education as their capacity to make meaningful choices and contribute to decisions that shape their learning experiences. This agency encompasses both children's sense of agency—their beliefs about their ability to influence their educational environment—and their exercise of agency through concrete instances of decision-making and action. The theoretical dimensions of agency and its relationship to educational structures will be elaborated in our theoretical framework. Despite growing recognition of its importance, there remains a significant gap between policy commitments to children's agency and its implementation in everyday school practices. This gap has substantial implications, as recent research demonstrates clear benefits of supporting children's meaningful choice in education, including increased engagement,

motivation, and potential improvements in academic outcomes (Dong et al., 2021; Kaya & Erdem, 2021; Manyukhina & Wyse, 2025).

This study is situated within England's primary education system, where children aged 5–11 learn within the framework of the national curriculum and standardised assessments, including Key Stage 1 and 2 SATs examinations. Primary schools operate under significant accountability pressures through these assessments and Ofsted inspections. While Article 12 of the UNCRC establishes children's right to express views in matters affecting them, implementing this right within standardised systems proves challenging. The combined pressures of assessment, accountability frameworks, and content-heavy curricula constrain children's participation in educational decisions. Addressing these constraints requires a systematic approach to supporting agency within educational structures rather than opposing them. Our 3-year study across three contrasting primary schools examined how different institutional approaches create varying opportunities for children's agency by analysing structural conditions, resulting practices, and children's lived experiences. Through this analysis, we developed the concept of 'structured freedom'—a framework for systematically supporting children's agency through thoughtfully designed educational structures that enable meaningful participation in learning.

Our study builds upon important existing work on children's agency in education (Alderson & Yoshida, 2016; Lundy, 2007) while making several distinct contributions. By applying critical realism to children's agency in primary education, we extend previous understandings of how agency emerges through complex interactions between structural conditions, daily practices, and lived experiences. This framework enhances understanding of how educational domains are shaped and potentially transformed. Our longitudinal investigation examines how children's agency operates within England's national curriculum context, centring children's voices across diverse school settings. Through our analysis of three distinct primary settings, we demonstrate that supporting children's agency does not require choosing between agency and structure. Rather, thoughtfully designed structures can enable children's agency while maintaining educational standards. Our findings develop the concept of 'structured freedom' as a practical framework for schools navigating these competing demands, offering insights for implementation in varied contexts.

LITERATURE REVIEW: AGENCY IN EDUCATION

Research on children's agency in education reveals significant connections with academic outcomes. A meta-analysis by Kaya and Erdem (2021) found that supporting student autonomy positively impacts academic achievement, with the strongest effect (0.24) in primary education, suggesting that early opportunities for agency are particularly valuable. This connection between agency and achievement is further evidenced in Tam et al.'s (2023) study of 1425 Hong Kong primary students, where specific mechanisms for supporting agency—such as goal-setting workshops and self-reflection through project diaries—enhanced both children's sense of agency and their academic competence.

These benefits of agency manifest across different subject domains. In science education, Siry et al. (2024) demonstrated how allowing children flexibility in what and how they investigated scientific concepts enhanced their engagement. Mathematics learning similarly benefits from agency-supporting approaches: Lee et al.'s (2020) synthesis of four studies showed how playful, student-directed environments transformed engagement with mathematics, particularly significant given how mathematics classrooms often lack opportunities for student agency. In literacy, Dong et al.'s (2021) experimental study with Chinese students showed how self-directed word learning improved reading comprehension across ability

levels, with struggling readers achieving similar outcomes to their peers when given autonomy over their learning.

Recent research challenges deficit models of agency that assume some children lack capacity for meaningful participation. Louie's (2020) study across five elementary schools revealed how teachers' assumptions about differential student capabilities can undermine opportunities for agency in mathematics instruction, even when schools explicitly aim to foster student participation. This impact of deficit thinking is further evidenced in Hargreaves et al.'s (2021) longitudinal study of 23 children designated as 'lower-attaining': while these children demonstrated clear capacity for autonomous learning, restrictive classroom rules limited their ability to exercise this capacity, leading to a reduced sense of competence and diminished engagement. In contrast, Khusnutdinova and Filipova's (2024) case study of the 'Green School' project showed how positioning students as co-participants transformed their engagement—when children worked alongside teachers as co-researchers, their sense of responsibility emerged from intrinsic motivation rather than external obligation. Similarly, Casesa et al.'s (2023) study demonstrated young emergent bilingual children's capacity for sophisticated engagement when given agency through narrative writing about COVID-19, revealing their ability to analyse complex social experiences.

Beyond academic achievement, research demonstrates the importance of agency for children's broader development and wellbeing. Rios et al.'s (2023) study of environmental education showed how children's agency and environmental awareness developed reciprocally—when children had opportunities to take meaningful action through activities like creating vegetable gardens, both their understanding of environmental issues and their capacity to address them grew. In examining civic engagement, Payne et al. (2020) showed how increased agency in early childhood classrooms enabled children to move beyond learning about citizenship to actively participating in their communities. Stephenson and Dobson's (2020) research with primary children revealed how creative agency through drama and writing enhanced children's wellbeing and social imagination, demonstrating the deep connection between agency and children's social–emotional development.

These empirical benefits align with established children's rights in education, particularly Article 12 of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, emphasising children's right to express views in matters affecting them. However, translating this right into meaningful agency remains challenging. While research demonstrates the importance of agency and confirms its benefits, we lack detailed understanding of how schools navigate competing demands between enabling agency and meeting standardised requirements. This gap between recognising agency's value and understanding its practical implementation is particularly significant given increasing international emphasis on student agency, as evidenced by frameworks like the OECD's Learning Compass (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, 2018). Our study addresses this gap by examining how different institutional approaches create varying possibilities for children's agency within England's standardised educational context.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK: A CRITICAL REALIST PERSPECTIVE

Critical realism reconceptualises the relationship between educational structures and individual action. Rather than viewing structure and agency as inherently opposed, it illuminates their interplay across three domains: the real, the actual, and the empirical—revealing how children's agency emerges within structured school environments.

At the foundation lies the domain of the real, encompassing the underlying structures and mechanisms that shape educational possibilities. Within schools, this includes the

architecture of curriculum frameworks, assessment systems, and institutional policies that create the fundamental conditions for children's agency. While these structures are influential—a national curriculum, for instance, establishes certain parameters around content and delivery—their impact is not rigidly deterministic. Even within prescribed content frameworks, considerable variation exists in how that content reaches children in the classroom.

Moving to the domain of the actual, we see how these structural conditions materialise in everyday educational life through specific practices and events. Here, mandated curriculum structures might translate into particular teaching approaches, such as teacher-directed content delivery or an emphasis on test preparation in response to assessment pressures. Yet, importantly, this translation from structure to practice is not straightforward or uniform. Similar structural conditions can generate markedly different practices across settings—while one school might respond to standardised curriculum requirements with rigid delivery methods, another might find creative ways to promote children's agency while meeting the same requirements.

The empirical domain captures how children experience and make sense of these educational practices, developing their understanding of what is possible within their school environment. These understandings emerge through repeated encounters with enabling or constraining practices. In a context dominated by standardised testing, children might come to view learning primarily through the lens of assessment preparation. Similarly, when school councils operate without meaningful influence, children may interpret formal participation structures as merely symbolic, affecting their willingness to engage with future opportunities for voice.

Critical realism's recognition of absence as causally significant also offers particularly valuable insight into children's agency. The systematic lack of opportunities for meaningful participation can profoundly shape children's understanding of their role in education, just as much as the presence of such opportunities. This perspective enables us to distinguish between two interrelated aspects of agency: children's sense of agency—their beliefs about their capacity to influence their education—and their exercise of agency through concrete instances of choice-making and action.

This distinction is important because the literature reveals agency as a complex network of interrelated concepts: voice, autonomy, goal-setting, self-reflection, self-direction, engagement, among others. These are not discrete elements but interconnected dimensions that collectively shape children's capacity for meaningful participation. Each concept offers a distinct lens—autonomy highlighting personal choice, self-reflection emphasising metacognitive awareness, engagement focussing on emotional investment—converging to illuminate the multifaceted nature of agency.

Our framework acknowledges this complexity by recognising agency's dual nature: both the interpersonal dimension of children's sense of agency and the structural opportunities to exercise it. In relation to voice specifically, we align with O'Reilly and O'Grady's (2024) perspective, which makes a crucial distinction between voice and agency, drawing on Lundy's model. They define voice as students' rights to express views and have those views given due weight, while agency refers to the actual actions and decision-making capabilities that stem from those voices. Their analysis suggests that authentic voice serves as a prerequisite for genuine agency.

The temporal dimension of agency is equally important in our analysis. Emirbayer and Mische's (1998) conceptualisation of agency as a temporally embedded process of social engagement provides a valuable framework for understanding how children's agency develops over time. Their framework identifies three temporal dimensions: the iterational element drawing on past experiences, the projective capacity to imagine future possibilities, and the practical–evaluative dimension that grounds both past and future in present circumstances. Through this lens, we can see how children's sense and exercise of agency develop through

an ongoing cycle: past experiences of agency (or its absence) shape present interpretations, which influence current actions, creating new experiences that in turn shape future possibilities.

Critical realism enriches this temporal understanding through its concept of emergence—how new properties and capacities arise from interactions across domains. Children's capacity for meaningful agency emerges gradually through the dynamic interplay between institutional structures, daily practices, and lived experiences. This emergent quality helps explain why schools operating under identical curriculum requirements often foster quite different possibilities for children's agency—through their distinct patterns of implementing requirements and the varying ways children interpret these experiences, similar structural conditions can produce markedly different outcomes.

Critical realism thus proves particularly suited to studying children's agency in education for three key reasons. First, through its layered ontology of the real, actual, and empirical domains, it enables examination of not just observable practices but the underlying mechanisms that generate opportunities for agency. Second, its concept of emergence reveals how agency develops through dynamic interactions between structures and individual capacities rather than being simply present or absent. Third, its emphasis on absence as causally significant is crucial for understanding how lack of opportunities shapes children's agency development just as powerfully as their presence.

From this theoretical framework emerge three central research questions: How do different structures create varying conditions for children's agency? How do these conditions materialise in daily educational practices? And how do children experience and interpret these practices, shaping their developing sense and exercise of agency? These questions take on particular significance within standardised education systems like England's, where assessment and accountability frameworks can significantly constrain opportunities for children's agency.

RESEARCH DESIGN

The research employed an in-depth qualitative approach informed by critical realist principles. The research design was structured around critical realism's three domains of reality—the real, actual, and empirical—which informed both data collection and analysis. This framework enabled systematic examination of structural conditions, daily practices, and children's lived experiences of agency.

School selection and context

Three primary schools were purposely selected to represent different institutional approaches to children's agency while operating under England's national curriculum framework:

- Northern City State (NCS). An academy school with an explicitly agency-centred philosophy, located in a relatively affluent area within a deprived region (5% free school meals).
- South City Independent (SCI). A selective fee-paying school serving predominantly affluent families, following the national curriculum alignment while supplementing content to prepare students for examinations and entry into selective secondary schools.
- South City State (SCS). A large community school in a diverse urban area (48% free school meals), focussing on supporting their disadvantaged community through enriched learning experiences.

This selection enabled examination of how different institutional contexts shape possibilities for children's agency within standardised curriculum requirements.

Data collection

Data collection occurred over two academic years (2021–2023), with visits conducted once per half-term. The exact number of visits per school varied slightly: 21 visits to NCS, 18 visits to SCI (four conducted online), and 19 visits to SCS. Each visit encompassed multiple observations of both formal learning contexts (lessons in different subjects, including mathematics, English, art, and PE) and other activities (playtime, free time, assemblies, school council meetings, gardening, cooking, out-of-school trips such as museum visits).

The six case study pupils in each school were distributed across different classes (Years 3, 4 and 5 in the first year, moving to Years 4, 5 and 6 in the second year), allowing us to observe agency across different age groups and teaching contexts. Our data collection strategy aligned with critical realism's three domains.

Real domain (structural conditions):

- Semi-structured interviews with senior leadership teams and teachers.
- Analysis of school policies and curriculum materials.
- Focus on institutional approaches to enabling agency.

Actual domain (daily practices):

- Regular classroom observations across various contexts (lessons, playtime, school councils, assemblies).
- Documentation of agency-related practices and events.
- Observations conducted across different times of day and settings to capture the full range of children's experiences.

Empirical domain (lived experiences):

- Innovative participatory methods including Learning Choice Diaries (where children documented daily experiences of agency) and Agency Timelines (where they mapped moments of high and low agency).
- Individual interviews and focus groups with case study pupils (all sessions were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim, except where children expressed discomfort about being recorded, respecting their right to choose how their views were documented).

Interview and focus group question guides were developed based on our critical realist framework, explicitly prompting children to reflect on both enabling and constraining factors affecting their agency. We employed both individual interviews and focus groups for complementary purposes: individual interviews allowed for in-depth exploration of personal experiences, while focus groups facilitated discussion of shared experiences and revealed group dynamics relevant to collective agency. Children were invited to individual interviews based on their participation in the Learning Choice Diaries and Agency Timeline activities, ensuring continuity between different data collection methods.

All research data were managed in accordance with GDPR requirements and ethical guidelines for research involving children.

Analysis

Our analytical approach was primarily informed by critical realist principles rather than following a specific methodological framework. Using NVivo software, we organised data across critical realism's three domains. Our coding began with broad categories from our theoretical framework, iteratively refined through ongoing data engagement. Both researchers met regularly to discuss emerging codes, share interpretations, and resolve analytical discrepancies through collaborative dialogue.

Within the structural domain, we identified recurring patterns in how schools implemented policies, organised assessment practices, and established institutional mechanisms for student voice. In the actual domain, our analysis focused on how these structural conditions translated into classroom practices—examining how teachers implemented curriculum requirements, assessment approaches, and institutional policies, and what opportunities for agency these practices created or constrained. For the empirical domain, our coding focussed on children's emotional responses to opportunities for agency, their interpretations of these experiences and their evolving understanding of when and how they could exercise agency in school.

Importantly, our coding framework captured both enabling and constraining factors affecting agency. While Table 1 presents codes primarily focussed on expressions of agency, each code included analysis of limitations and constraints. For example, the code ‘agency in learning’ encompassed not only instances where children could make decisions but also situations where such opportunities were restricted or absent. This approach allowed us to examine both the presence and absence of agency, consistent with critical realism's emphasis on absence as causally significant.

Through this detailed analytical process, we revealed how different institutional approaches created varying conditions for children's agency, and how these conditions interacted with daily practices to shape children's experiences. These insights led to our development of ‘structured freedom’ as a conceptual framework explaining how schools can create conditions that support children's agency while maintaining educational standards.

Ethical considerations

This research received full ethical approval from the UCL Ethics Committee. We implemented comprehensive safeguards, including obtaining informed consent from schools, teachers and parents/guardians, while securing children's assent through age-appropriate information sheets. The assent process was ongoing, with children regularly reminded of their right to withdraw. We addressed the influence of researchers' presence through sustained engagement in each setting, gradually building rapport with children, which fostered their comfort and openness with researchers. Given the sensitive nature of adult–child research relationships, we developed careful protocols including child-led activities and flexible data collection methods to ensure authentic expression of views. Participant confidentiality was protected through pseudonyms and altered identifying details, and all researchers underwent enhanced DBS checks before fieldwork.

FINDINGS

Our findings are organised according to critical realism's three domains of reality, demonstrating how children's agency emerges through the complex interaction between structural conditions, daily practices, and lived experiences. In the domain of the real, we examine

TABLE 1 Thematic analysis framework.

Theme	Theme definition	Code	Code definition	Subcode	Subcode definition
Choice	How children experience and exercise choice in school	Agency in learning	Children's ability to make decisions about their learning experiences	In lesson design	Children's input into how lessons are structured and delivered
				During lesson time	Choices available to children during actual lessons
		Agency in activities	Children's ability to choose activities outside formal learning	Free-time choices	Decisions during breaks and unstructured time
				Extra-curricular	Choices about clubs and additional activities
Subject hierarchies	How different subjects are valued and prioritised within schools	Core subjects	Treatment of mathematics, English, and science	Status	Perceived importance of subjects
				Flexibility	How much choice is given within subjects
		Non-core subjects	Treatment of other curriculum areas	Perceived value	How these subjects are viewed by teachers and children
Social dynamics	How different subjects are valued and prioritised within schools	Peer relationships	Interactions between children	Collaborative learning	Agency in group-work situations
				Interaction outside the classroom	Agency in non-learning situations
		Teacher relationships	Interactions between children and teachers	Communication	How children express views to teachers
School council	Formal structures for student voice	Representation	How children participate in decision-making		
		Impact	Actual influence on school practices	Changes in learning	Concrete results from council actions related to learning
				Changes in other areas	Concrete results from council actions related to other areas
Curriculum	How curriculum structures affect agency	Content control	Who determines what is taught	School control	School-directed aspects
				Children's input	Areas where children influence content
		Delivery methods	How curriculum is implemented	Flexibility	Room for adaptation to student interests

(Continues)

TABLE 1 (Continued)

Theme	Theme definition	Code	Code definition	Subcode	Subcode definition
Assessment	How evaluation practices affect agency	Formal assessment	Impact of tests and examinations	Test preparation	How assessment shapes teaching
				Children's views of subjects	How assessments affect children's perception of different subjects
School and society	Broader contextual influences on agency	Family background	How home life affects school agency	Cultural factors	Impact of cultural expectations
				Economic factors	Impact of socioeconomic status
		School culture	Institutional approach to agency	School values	How agency aligns with school ethos
				Local community	Community influence on school practices

how educational policies, frameworks, and institutional arrangements in each of the schools created fundamental conditions that shaped possibilities for agency. The domain of the actual reveals how these structural conditions materialised in everyday school life through observed practices and events. The domain of the empirical captures children's lived experiences and interpretations of these practices, showing how they developed understanding of their capacity for agency. By analysing our data through these three domains, we reveal both enabling and constraining factors at each level, demonstrating how agency develops through the dynamic interplay between educational structures and children's experiences.

The domain of the real: Structural conditions for agency

The three schools, while all operating within England's national curriculum framework, established markedly different structural conditions for children's agency through their policies, frameworks, and institutional arrangements. These conditions emerged through the interaction of curriculum structures, assessment frameworks, and institutional mechanisms.

At NCS, multiple structural elements were designed to enable children's agency. The school implemented an 'object-based' curriculum design system, which embedded children's participation through transition days at each academic year's end. During these days, children brought objects representing topics they wished to explore—for example, a fossil that sparked interest in geology or an image of a person they found inspiring. This initiated a 2-week consultation process: the first week involved teacher-facilitated discussions about these objects, followed by collaborative development of questions that would shape the term's learning. The school organised daily learning through a system of six skill-focused stations: Collaboration, ICT/Research, Communication, Problem Solving, Reflection, and Application. In each lesson, children could choose which stations to work at and organise themselves into groups based on their self-assessed learning needs and interests.

The school's assessment approach combined innovative and traditional methods. Children used topic books to document their learning journey across most subjects, choosing how to present their understanding through writing, drawings, diagrams or other forms of representation. However, the school's agency-centred practices had to be adjusted in Years

2 and 6, where national assessment requirements necessitated ability grouping for SATs preparation, demonstrating how external structural conditions could constrain the school's approach.

School councils emerged as the primary formal mechanism for collective agency across all three schools, reflecting common practice in English primary schools. These councils varied in structure, scope of influence, and effectiveness. Our investigation went beyond merely noting their presence or absence; we documented their operational procedures, democratic processes and actual impact on school decisions in both academic and non-academic domains. Thus, NCS developed a comprehensive structure for hearing and acting on children's voices through multiple specialised councils, each with specific focus areas and regular meetings. These included an Eco-Council for environmental initiatives, a Play Council combining Year 6 and Year 2 children, Wellbeing Ambassadors, Forest Rangers, and a Creative Council. A dedicated Curriculum Council focussed on learning matters. Democratic processes were integral to these councils, with age-appropriate voting methods—formal voting for older children and adapted approaches like blind voting with raised hands for younger ones. Council membership rotated annually to ensure broad participation. Representatives gathered classmates' perspectives, communicated decisions back to classes and brought forward issues raised by peers for collective deliberation. These councils proved effective in conveying children's concerns and enabling their issues to be addressed. We observed a council meeting where children's representatives raised the issue that assembly songs had become repetitive and lacked variety. Children expressed their desire for new songs to be introduced. The meeting, mediated by two school staff members, resulted in the matter being placed on the school's agenda to ensure the children's concerns about song selection would be addressed.

At SCI, while independent from national curriculum requirements, structural conditions were shaped by expectations around selective secondary school preparation. The school's curriculum framework prioritised academic performance, evidenced by initiatives like the Vocabulary Ninja scheme introduced across all year groups to enhance children's English performance. This scheme comprised daily 5- to 10-min activities centred around a ‘Word of the Day’ and extended through a ‘Word of the Week’ to encourage further discussions. Within this academically focussed structure, there were some opportunities for choice—notably in mathematics, where, for example, a colour-coded folder system organised content by complexity levels, enabling children to select additional challenges once mandatory tasks were completed.

This emphasis on academic achievement was further reflected in the school's comprehensive assessment structure. Children undertook multiple forms of evaluation, including national tests, cognitive ability tests, verbal reasoning tests, and National Foundation for Educational Research (NFER) progress tests. Despite this extensive assessment framework, the system provided no opportunities for children's involvement, with all evaluation processes controlled by teachers and no mechanisms for self-assessment or peer assessment.

While academic decision-making remained firmly with staff, the school maintained formal channels for children's voice in non-academic matters through its School Council. The council operated with clear democratic processes, with each class electing one male and one female representative in September. While academic matters were explicitly excluded from its remit, children could influence practical aspects of school life such as physical environment changes and lunch menu choices. The school also addressed wellbeing through its Mental Health Assembly, which provided children with direct channels for raising concerns by filling out anonymous forms, leading to concrete support actions when needed.

At SCS, the school's approach was substantially informed by the perceptions of the headteacher and staff about the context of the school serving a disadvantaged community.

The curriculum followed a thematic approach, connecting subjects through integrated topics. Notably, theme selection and implementation remained teacher-directed, without mechanisms for children's input. The school enriched its core curriculum framework through the https://openfutures.com/ Open Futures programme, which incorporated four elements: AskIt (philosophical inquiry), GrowIt (food cultivation), CookIt (food and identity exploration), and FilmIt (using media for learning). Philosophy for Children sessions provided designated spaces for child-led discussion—though these remained separate from core subject delivery.

The assessment structure was built around knowledge organisers—detailed documents that specified the essential facts, concepts, and vocabulary children needed to master for each topic. These organisers established a teacher-directed framework that defined the core content to be covered. The school incorporated some flexibility through project-based assessments, particularly in summer terms, where children could select how to demonstrate their understanding of prescribed topics. The school's structures for children's voice in decision-making were notably limited. Following the disbandment of the previous School Council, the school introduced student teams to address various matters in school life. However, these teams lacked both regular meeting schedules and clear operational procedures. Although the headteacher indicated plans to implement 'Smart School Councils', during the study period this had not materialised, leaving no formal channels for children to influence school decisions. This created a significant gap in opportunities for collective agency.

These varying structural conditions across the three schools created distinctly different possibilities for children's agency. While all operated within national curriculum requirements, each school developed unique approaches to balancing these requirements with opportunities for children's participation. NCS established comprehensive agency-supporting mechanisms across curriculum, lesson design, and institutional structures, though these were necessarily modified in examination years. SCI maintained clear but bounded opportunities for agency within its strongly academic framework, particularly in non-academic domains. SCS, despite lacking systematic mechanisms for collective agency, provided specific spaces for individual agency through extra-curricular activities and project-based assessments. These contrasting institutional approaches established different foundations for how agency could emerge in practice, each shaped by the school's particular context and priorities.

Teachers' perspectives and practices played significant roles in shaping agency opportunities across all three schools, though in distinctly different ways. At NCS, teachers actively positioned themselves as facilitators of children's agency, viewing children as capable decision-makers. At SCI, teachers maintained clear authority over academic matters while encouraging independence in non-academic domains. Their approach reflected not necessarily a view that children lacked capacity for independent choice, but rather that academic achievement required structured guidance. At SCS, while the lack of formal participation structures might suggest deficit views of children's capabilities, our interviews revealed more complex factors at work. Teachers expressed belief in children's capacity for agency but cited external pressures and contextual challenges that constrained implementation. These variations demonstrate how institutional priorities and contextual factors, rather than fundamental views about children's capabilities, ultimately shaped the schools' approaches to agency.

While not directly engaging with parents/guardians as participants, our study identified parental influence as a significant factor affecting children's agency, particularly at SCI where parental expectations created additional pressure on both teachers and children to prioritise academic performance, often at the expense of children's own interests. A more comprehensive examination of this parental factor, including direct engagement with parents, represents an important direction for future research.

The domain of the actual: Agency in daily practice

Our observations revealed how structural conditions materialised into everyday practices in each school, showing distinct patterns of how agency opportunities were realised or constrained in practice.

At NCS, we observed the learning station system generating consistent patterns of children's autonomy. Children moved independently between stations during lessons, making self-directed decisions about their learning activities. In a typical lesson, some children chose to begin at the ICT station researching independently, while others formed collaborative groups at the Problem-Solving station. Children showed clear familiarity with this system, requiring no teacher direction to select activities, organise movements or manage time.

In our examination of topic books, we saw how assessment practices enabled children's agency. Children documented their learning in diverse ways—some created graphs and charts, others wrote creative stories or combined drawings and written reflections to capture what interested them most. These topic books were used across a range of subjects, mostly humanities, allowing children to shape their own learning narrative. However, English and mathematics remained outside this system, subject instead to more regulated formal assessments, demonstrating how structural assessment requirements translated into differentiated practices across subjects.

A key example of how classroom experience shaped existing structure emerged through the curriculum design process. When a child brought in an ammolite linked to their interest in Harry Potter, teachers planned geology lessons, missing the child's actual interest in magical stories. Recognising this gap between their initial interpretation and the child's true interest, the school extended their curriculum planning meetings from one day to two weeks. This change gave teachers more time to understand children's interests fully. This incident led to lasting changes in how curriculum consultations were structured, demonstrating how events in practice (the actual domain) could reshape fundamental structural conditions (the real domain).

At SCI, we observed clear differences between academic and non-academic practices. Core subject lessons followed strict routines—during English lessons, teachers delivered spelling tests in standardised formats, with children writing responses without any input into content or delivery. Mathematics lessons followed similar fixed patterns, though we observed children selecting additional tasks from colour-coded folders after completing the required work. Test preparation was a dominant feature in many lessons, with children working through examination materials in set sequences. In contrast, music lessons showed much more freedom for children. Children could choose their musical instruments and help select songs for practice. The physical setup of these lessons was also notably different from core subjects—children could sit where they preferred, often choosing to sit cross-legged on the carpet rather than at desks, unlike the fixed seating in English and mathematics lessons.

A clear example of children taking initiative emerged in the creation of a Rubik's cube club. We observed a group of Year 5 children presenting their detailed proposal to the headteacher, explaining how they would organise sessions by skill level, teach solving techniques to their peers, and run weekly competitions. The headteacher discussed their proposal in detail, considering practical matters like equipment costs, space needs, and timing. The club was then established and run by the children themselves, with minimal teacher oversight. This showed how the school's separation between academic and non-academic activities played out in daily life, creating different spaces where children had varying levels of freedom to make decisions.

At SCS, daily activities reflected a mainly teacher-led approach. Lesson observations showed pre-set topics and group assignments, with limited room for children's choices. During a religious education lesson on the Five Pillars of Islam, while the content was fixed,

children could choose how to present their work—some groups created visual posters, while others wrote explanations. Philosophy for children sessions were notably different, with children leading discussions and creating their own questions, though these sessions remained separate from regular subject teaching. Assessment was particularly structured. In English lessons, we observed children working through practice papers following teacher-set routines, with a focus on right/wrong answers and little room for different approaches. Summer-term projects offered more flexibility—we saw children choosing different ways to present their work and different methods of working, though always within set topic boundaries.

The lack of a school council was clearly visible in daily school life. During our observations we saw no instances of children contributing to school-wide decisions, no meetings to gather children's views, and no ways for children to influence school matters. This went beyond just missing a council structure—we observed no other ways for children to have a collective voice in practice. This showed how the absence of formal structures for children's input had real consequences in everyday school life.

Our observations showed how each school's structure shaped different daily practices. While all schools worked within national requirements, each created distinctly different environments for children's agency. At NCS, children's decision-making was built into daily activities, though this was more limited during exam periods. At SCI, there was a clear divide—children had little say in academic work but considerable freedom in other areas. At SCS, while teaching was mainly teacher-led, children had specific opportunities to make choices, particularly in philosophy sessions and project work. These differences showed how each school's approach created different possibilities for children to shape their school experience.

The domain of the empirical: Children's lived experiences

While our observations revealed how agency opportunities emerged in practice, children's own accounts and interpretations revealed how they experienced and made sense of these possibilities in their daily school lives.

At NCS, children's interpretations of the learning station system revealed how regular opportunities for meaningful choice shaped their understanding of what was possible in school. For example, Jaleel's reflection—'*I feel quite powerful because I get to pick my independent activity*'—showed how making decisions about learning fostered a sense of agency. In contrast, when describing more structured mathematics sessions, Cecilia explained how teacher-directed activities made her feel '*Just like we have to do what we're told*'. These contrasting experiences within the same school demonstrated how different approaches shaped children's understanding of their ability to influence their learning.

Children's topic books prompted particularly revealing reflections about how choice operated differently across subjects. Molly explained this distinction clearly: '*Apart from maths and English … Because they're kind of just different. For the topic books, we choose what we want to learn about but in maths and English, we just have to do it.*' This understanding influenced how children approached different subjects, showing their growing awareness of where and how they could make decisions within the school's structure. Children's experiences of the council system revealed how even well-established participation structures could be challenging to navigate. When asked about her Art Council role, Molly admitted '*I am not quite sure because I have never been it yet*', despite having been elected weeks earlier. This uncertainty showed how children's sense of involvement depended not just on having opportunities available, but on their ability to understand and use these opportunities effectively.

At SCI, children's accounts revealed clear boundaries around where they felt they could make choices, particularly in academic subjects. Leyla expressed this directly: '*I feel I don't*

have the freedom to choose when we're doing English or maths or science.' Raj shared this view: '*they probably have something either already planned*' and '*in school they have to be really strict*', showing how children had come to see teacher direction as both normal and necessary. This understanding extended to children's views about whether they wanted more choice in learning. When asked if they would like more input into academic subjects, children expressed hesitation. As Leyla explained: '*Because there might be a lot of things that we can do, and it can also be quite hard to choose or hard options maybe*.' Arun supported this view, saying teachers should make choices '*because they know all the aspects of the subjects*'. These responses showed how experiences of structured teaching had led children to see limited choice as helpful for their learning.

Children's awareness of these boundaries was particularly clear in how they viewed the School Council's role. When asked about suggesting learning topics through the council, Imran's response that he '*never thought of saying that*' revealed how their experiences had shaped their ideas about what was possible. Leyla's worry that curriculum suggestions might get people '*in trouble*' further showed their understanding of these limits. As Sonia explained, while '*choices are important if you can make certain places, like for example the school, better*', these choices were understood as strictly limited to practical matters.

At SCS, children's experiences showed how a lack of connection between giving input and seeing results weakened their sense of involvement. Rita expressed this clearly: '*You just choose things and then you just do them, you don't think much about it … it doesn't really matter*.' Her observation that '*we're not like other schools … we don't decide, we just do what we're told to do*' showed how repeated experiences of limited influence had shaped children's understanding of their role in school. Children often spoke about the pointlessness of expressing preferences. Ayla's experience with science teaching was particularly telling: '*they do not do science often*', she explained, describing how her request for more science lessons was met with claims of insufficient time. Such experiences led children to stop making suggestions, knowing that '*they will just say no*'. Through these repeated experiences, children learned that their suggestions rarely led to change.

Children had developed clear ideas about where they could and couldn't have a say across different subjects. Charlie described mathematics and English as '*normal*' and '*common*' subjects, while Ayesha saw core subjects as '*work*' and activities like art as '*fun*'. Maya's thoughts about mathematics lessons showed how deep this understanding went: '*We just have to learn it … there's no point saying what we want because it's already decided*.' These distinctions revealed how children's experiences had led them to accept different levels of input across different areas of school life.

The experiences across these three schools showed how children's understanding shaped both their sense of involvement and their willingness to participate. At NCS, children knew where and how they could influence their learning; at SCI, they understood and accepted the separation between academic and non-academic choices; while at SCS, repeated experiences of suggestions having no effect led many children to stop trying to influence their environment. These patterns showed how children's experiences actively shaped how they engaged with future opportunities to exercise agency in their school life.

DISCUSSION: TOWARDS STRUCTURED FREEDOM

Our analysis reveals how children's agency emerges through complex interactions between educational structures, daily practices, and lived experiences. This interaction suggests that supporting children's agency requires more than simply removing constraints or offering occasional choices. Rather, it requires thoughtfully designed structures through which children can experience meaningful influence over their education. This understanding

leads us to propose 'structured freedom'—a framework that navigates between two contrasting perspectives in educational discourse (for which we provide more detail in an open access book: Manyukhina & Wyse, 2025). First, it challenges the view that meaningful participation requires the complete removal of institutional frameworks—a position sometimes advocated by proponents of more radical democratic education (Neill, 1960). Second, it counters deficit perspectives that view children as fundamentally incapable of meaningful decision-making, which have historically influenced traditional educational approaches (Burman, 2016).

In mapping current discourses on agency, Matusov et al. (2016) developed a typology of approaches to agency in educational contexts. By reviewing current theoretical perspectives, they identified four distinct normative approaches to agency: instrumental, effortful, dynamically emergent, and authorial

In our conception of structured freedom, children's agency is characterised by critical transcendence of existing educational practices, meaningful participation in curriculum design, dialogic engagement with learning objectives, and creative transformation of educational experiences. This aligns with the authorial agency model, which views students not as passive recipients of predetermined knowledge, but as active co-creators capable of reshaping educational experiences through deliberative, reflective engagement.

Like authorial agency, the type of agency presupposed by structured freedom moves beyond instrumental skill acquisition or effortful goal pursuit. Instead, it enables children to co-create learning experiences, challenge curricular boundaries, and exercise genuine decision-making power within deliberately designed structural supports. Our critical realist analysis reveals how institutional structures can actively generate, rather than constrain, children's capacity for independent choice and action. This framework recognises that while structures shape possibilities for agency, they can serve as enablers when thoughtfully designed. From this understanding, we develop four key principles that underpin successful implementation of structured freedom.

Three-domain integration

The first principle is alignment across all three domains. Our findings show how misalignment undermines children's agency—when structural conditions fail to translate into effective practices, or when children's experiences don't align with intended opportunities. Across our schools, we saw how this alignment varied significantly—from cases where structural intentions were successfully realised in practice and meaningfully experienced by children, to instances where disconnects between policy, practice, and experience limited children's agency opportunities. This integration across domains naturally fosters curriculum coherence and connects directly to fundamental questions about the purpose of education, since alignment between structures, practices, and experiences enables schools to more effectively realise their educational aims.

Choice architecture

The second principle focusses on the thoughtful design of practical opportunities for agency. Effective choice architecture involves not just creating opportunities for choice but carefully considering how these opportunities are structured and supported. Our findings revealed how different approaches to structuring choice shaped children's engagement. Success depended on clear frameworks that helped children understand the available options, their purpose, and how to navigate them effectively. Where such scaffolding was absent

or inconsistent, children often struggled to meaningfully engage with choice opportunities, even when these were formally available.

Systematic mechanisms for agency

The third principle emphasises the importance of having clear and regular ways for children to influence all areas of school life. Our analysis showed how the reliability of these channels shaped children's opportunities to have a collective voice. Schools took different approaches to setting up these systems—NCS created comprehensive structures covering many aspects of school life, SCI limited children's input to specific areas, while SCS lacked systematic mechanisms for children to contribute to decisions. These differences in how schools organised opportunities for children's input affected how much children could genuinely participate in shaping their school experience.

Experiential development

The fourth principle recognises how experiences of agency inform future engagement. Across all three schools, children's prior experiences shaped their recognition and use of subsequent opportunities. When children successfully effected desired changes, this nurtured both their sense of agency and likelihood of exercising agency in the future. Conversely, when attempts to influence their environment proved futile, children disengaged from future opportunities, creating negative cycles of diminishing agency.

These principles work together to create conditions where children's agency can flourish within educational structures. When schools attend to domain integration, thoughtfully design opportunities, establish systematic mechanisms, and support positive agency experiences, children develop both the understanding and the capacity to influence their education. This suggests that the challenge is not choosing between structure and agency, but designing structures that enable rather than constrain children's agency in their school life.

CONCLUSION

Our examination of three schools demonstrates how structural conditions, practices, and experiences interact to enable or constrain agency. Children's agency can be supported within—not at the expense of—educational structures. Structured freedom offers a framework for enabling agency while maintaining standards through thoughtful design.

Our study advances understanding both theoretically and empirically. By applying critical realism's three domains to children's educational agency, we reveal how agency emerges through the complex interaction between structures, practices, and experiences. Teachers play a pivotal role in this process, with their pedagogical approaches and beliefs determining whether structural possibilities become meaningful opportunities for children's agency. This demonstrates how children's capacity for agency develops through engagement with well-designed structures, rather than being determined by age or academic ability. Our findings challenge prevalent assumptions that certain groups—whether younger children, those deemed lower-attaining or those from disadvantaged backgrounds—need more direction and fewer choices in their education.

While our focus on three schools in England limits statistical generalisability, the theoretical insights have broader applicability. Through detailed examination of how agency emerges through interactions between structures, practices, and experiences, we have

identified patterns and mechanisms that extend beyond our specific cases. These include: how institutional structures create conditions for agency through curriculum design, assessment approaches, and decision-making channels; how these structural conditions translate into daily practice through teacher mediation and implementation; and how children's interpretations of their experiences shape their future agency. These mechanisms operate across different educational contexts, though their manifestations vary according to specific institutional priorities and approaches. The tension between supporting children's agency and meeting standardised curriculum requirements represents a common international challenge, and our findings about how schools navigate this tension through structured approaches to agency offer relevant insights for educational systems worldwide.

Implementing these principles in current educational contexts faces significant challenges, particularly given standardised assessment pressures. Even when schools have theoretical freedom to innovate, test preparation often works against children's agency, especially in core academic subjects. Concerns about high levels of deprivation in a given community may lead to limiting choice for disadvantaged children—reflecting a well-intentioned but potentially counterproductive belief that more top-down approaches better serve these learners. Addressing these challenges requires specific changes: curriculum frameworks and design approaches need to incorporate guidance on creating agency-supporting structures across all subjects; assessment frameworks must be revised to value student initiative and independent thinking; and accountability measures need to recognise schools' efforts to support children's agency.

I want to end on one critical consideration. Our study examined the complex interplay between children's agency and the multifaceted constraints of the educational system as it currently stands, including standardised assessment, accountability frameworks, and content-heavy curricula

Our research revealed nuanced possibilities for meaningful agency within these constraints. The child-led curriculum design processes we observed were particularly significant. At schools like NCS, children did not merely engage in tokenistic participation. Instead, they meaningfully contributed to curriculum development and, crucially, could directly observe the impact of their input in subsequent learning experiences. This visibility of their influence nurtured a profound sense of agency, demonstrating that even within current structural limitations, schools can create spaces for children's agency.

However, these findings are not meant to romanticise the existing educational structures or diminish the need for change. Our findings also indicate that these systemic pressures fundamentally challenge children's agency, narrowing pedagogical approaches and prioritising measurable outcomes over children's genuine engagement. While our research shows potential for agency, it simultaneously underscores the urgent need for fundamental systemic reconstruction.

Looking ahead, the following areas require further research: longitudinal studies examining how specific implementations of structured freedom (e.g., child-led curriculum designs, democratic decision-making structures and flexible assessment approaches) impact both children's agency and their academic outcomes over multiple years; classroom-level investigations of how teachers navigate the practical tensions between enabling children's agency and meeting externally imposed requirements; and tracking how early experiences of agency in primary settings influence children's motivation, engagement, and capacity for self-direction at subsequent stages of their educational journey.

Future research must examine how educational structures can be transformed to support genuine agency beyond tokenistic participation. Progress lies not in choosing between structure and agency, but in designing mechanisms that systematically support children's agency while maintaining educational standards.

FUNDING INFORMATION
This research was funded by The Leverhulme Trust.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST STATEMENT
The author declares no conflict of interest.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT
The data that support the findings of this study cannot be made publicly available due to ethical restrictions and the terms of participant consent. The research involved extensive observations and interviews with primary school children, teachers and staff across three schools, and the data contains sensitive and potentially identifiable information about minors and educational institutions. The participant consent agreements specifically outlined that the data would only be accessible to the research team to protect participant confidentiality. This restriction was part of the ethical approval granted by the UCL Ethics Committee.

ETHICS STATEMENT
This study received ethical approval from the UCL Ethics Committee. Informed consent was obtained from all participants in line with ethical guidelines.

PERMISSIONS STATEMENT
No permissions were required for material reproduction in this paper.

ORCID
Yana Manyukhina https://orcid.org/0000-0002-7960-2340

ENDNOTE
[1] The use of 'we' is in recognition of my collaboration with Dominic Wyse (as Principal Investigator) for the research reported in this paper. The use of 'I' signifies that a point is mine.

REFERENCES
Alderson, P., & Yoshida, T. (2016). Meanings of children's agency: When and where does agency begin and end? In F. Esser, M. S. Baader, T. Betz, & B. Hungerland (Eds.), *Reconceptualising agency and childhood: New perspectives in childhood studies* (pp. 75–88). Routledge.

Burman, E. (2016). *Deconstructing developmental psychology*. Routledge.

Casesa, R. H., LaDuke, A. E., Chavez Quiñonez, V., & Garibay, H. (2023). "Hice zoom con mi Abuelita": What we can learn from first and second graders' pandemic narratives. *The Reading Teacher*, *76*(4), 421–432. https://doi.org/10.1002/trtr.2174

Dong, Y., Chow, B. W. Y., Wu, S. X. Y., Zhou, J. D., & Zhao, Y. M. (2021). Enhancing poor readers' reading comprehension ability through word semantic knowledge training. *Reading & Writing Quarterly*, *37*(4), 348–364. https://doi.org/10.1080/10573569.2020.1795957

Emirbayer, M., & Mische, A. (1998). What is agency? *American Journal of Sociology*, *103*(4), 962–1023. https://doi.org/10.1086/231294

Hargreaves, E., Quick, L., & Buchanan, D. (2021). Systemic threats to the growth mindset: Classroom experiences of agency among children designated as 'lower-attaining'. *Cambridge Journal of Education*, *51*(5), 587–606. https://doi.org/10.1080/0305764X.2021.1891202

Kaya, M., & Erdem, C. (2021). Students' well-being and academic achievement: A meta-analysis study. *Child Indicators Research*, *14*(5), 1743–1767. https://doi.org/10.1007/s12187-021-09809-0

Khusnutdinova, M., & Filipova, A. (2024). "Unpacking" Agency in the School Project: Prospects for a participatory approach. *Education & Self Development*, *19*(1), 72–86. https://doi.org/10.26907/esd.19.1.07

Lee, C., Wongkamalasai, M., Thompson, N., Jasien, L., & Rubin, A. (2020). Designing playful mathematics learning environments: Synthesizing empirical research across contexts. In M. Gresalfi & I. S. Horn (Eds.), *The interdisciplinarity of the learning sciences* (pp. 1157–1164). International Society of the Learning Sciences.

Louie, N. (2020). Agency discourse and the reproduction of hierarchy in mathematics instruction. *Cognition and Instruction*, *38*(1), 1–34. https://doi.org/10.1080/07370008.2019.1677208

Lundy, L. (2007). 'Voice' is not enough: Conceptualising Article 12 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child. *British Educational Research Journal*, *33*(6), 927–942. https://doi.org/10.1080/01411920701657033

Manyukhina, Y., & Wyse, D. (2025). *Children's agency in the national curriculum: The promise of structured freedom*. Routledge.

Matusov, E., von Duyke, K., & Kayumova, S. (2016). Mapping concepts of agency in educational contexts. *Integrative Psychological and Behavioral Science*, *50*(3), 420–446.

Neill, A. S. (1960). *Summerhill: A radical approach to child rearing*. Hart Publishing.

O'Reilly, J., & O'Grady, E. (2024). 'Our opinions really matter': Conceptualising and operationalising authentic student voice through negotiated integrated curriculum. *Education 3-13*, *52*(6), 811–829. https://doi.org/10.1080/03004279.2024.2331954

Organisation for Economic Co-Operation and Development. (2018). *The future of education and skills: Education 2030*. OECD Publishing. https://www.oecd.org/education/2030/E2030%20Position%20Paper.pdf

Payne, K. A., Adair, J. K., Colegrove, K. S. S., Lee, S., Falkner, A., McManus, M., & Sachdeva, S. (2020). Reconceptualizing civic education for young children: Recognizing embodied civic action. *Education, Citizenship and Social Justice*, *15*(1), 35–50. https://doi.org/10.1177/1746197919858359

Rios, C., Neilson, A., & Menezes, I. (2023). Citizen children raising their voices and striving to save the planet … and themselves. In B. Wastijn & M. Ebbeck (Eds.), *International perspectives on educating for democracy in early childhood* (pp. 167–184). Springer. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-22256-7_10

Siry, C., Wilmes, S. E., & Frisch, R. (2024). Agentic student science engagement: Highlighting open-ended pedagogical structures in a plurilingual classroom. *International Journal of Educational Research*, *127*, 102357. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ijer.2023.102357

Stephenson, L., & Dobson, T. (2020). Releasing the socio-imagination: Children's voices on creativity, capability and mental well-being. *Support for Learning*, *35*(3), 454–472. https://doi.org/10.1111/1467-9604.12318

Tam, V. C., Chu, P., & Tsang, V. (2023). Engaging in self-directed leisure activities during a homework-free holiday: Impacts on primary school children in Hong Kong. *Journal of Global Education and Research*, *7*(1), 64–80. https://doi.org/10.5038/2577-509X.7.1.11742023

United Nations General Assembly. 1989. *Convention on the Rights of the Child*. United Nations Treaty Series, vol. 1577, pp. 3–178.

How to cite this article: Manyukhina, Y. (2025). Children's agency in England's primary schools: A case for structured freedom. *British Educational Research Journal*, *00*, 1–20. https://doi.org/10.1002/berj.4182