

# The Presence of Infant Agency in the Montessori Infant Environment

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## ABSTRACT

The topic of agency is in the spotlight in education, ethnography, feminist studies, human rights, psychology, public policy, social sciences, social work, and sociology nationally and internationally. Even with recognition of the increased significance of agency in childhood development, more attention needs to be concentrated on infants and agency. The critical issue is that many people, including researchers, do not believe agency is possible in children, let alone in infants, because infants cannot speak to articulate their intentions. Further, some do not want agency for children. This qualitative study seeks to fill this gap by presenting case study research conducted at the Montessori Children’s Center (West Harrison, NY), one of the first full-time Montessori childcare programs in the United States. Two infant rooms were observed. The research data was compiled using the case study method through direct observations in a natural setting. Then, rich descriptions and details provided narrative examples of infants in their actual Montessori infant environment. These narratives illustrate how infants experience and exhibit agency in the Montessori infant environment. The findings are expected to contribute significantly to discussions of agency and to inspire future naturalistic research in the fields of infant development and agency.

## PURPOSES

- Explore the nature of infant agency in a Montessori environment.
- Fill the gap to add to the body of literature and theories of agency that assert infants can be agential.
- Describe how infants express their agency in a Montessori environment.
- Reveal how the Montessori environment sets the conditions for agency to flourish.

## RESEARCH QUESTIONS

1. How do infants exhibit and express agency in the Montessori infant environment?
2. How does the intentional design of the infant Montessori environment create conditions to support the development of agency and agential actions in infants?

## KEY LITERATURE

- The literature review reveals the presence of agency specifically in infants:
- Salamon et al. (2017) see potential for research focusing on agency in infants to influence infants in childcare. They identify agency in infants as young as 6 months old through observations in a natural setting – without any contraptions.
  - Duhn (2022) calls on researchers to think differently about agency for infants, as they are “the not-yet in language.”
  - The idea of joint attention (Tomasello, 1995) expands the definition of agency to include communication expressed at 9 months and to direct others at 6 months.
  - Bednarski et al. (2022) reveal that minimal agency requires movement control.
  - Lillard (2008) argues that infants have agency, citing Watson and Ramey’s (1972) research on 2-month-old infants influencing an overhead mobile with their head motion.
  - Sloan et al. (2003) explore the origins of human agency using the mobile paradigm to add credibility and expand theories of agency, including the concept that agentic development is differentiated.
  - Thelen (1994) offers a foundational understanding of the ability of infants to self-direct their own learning and skill acquisition.
  - Duhn (2022), Lillard (2008), Salamon et al. (2017), Watson (1971), Wegner (2003), and Zaadnoordijk (2020) see infants expressing agency and subscribe to the idea that agency is important for healthy human development.

## METHODOLOGY

- Data collection occurred over a four-month period using an IBR-approved researcher-designed observation instrument.
- Data was collected, analyzed for patterns, coded, and reported using the qualitative case study method (Gall et al., 1999).
- Detailed, “thick descriptions” (Stahl & King, 2020) in a narrative style provide examples of the infants’ daily experiences, focusing on the setting, processes, and interactions with the environment, materials, other infants, and their guides. Each descriptive narration animates the infant’s lived experience in the Montessori context.



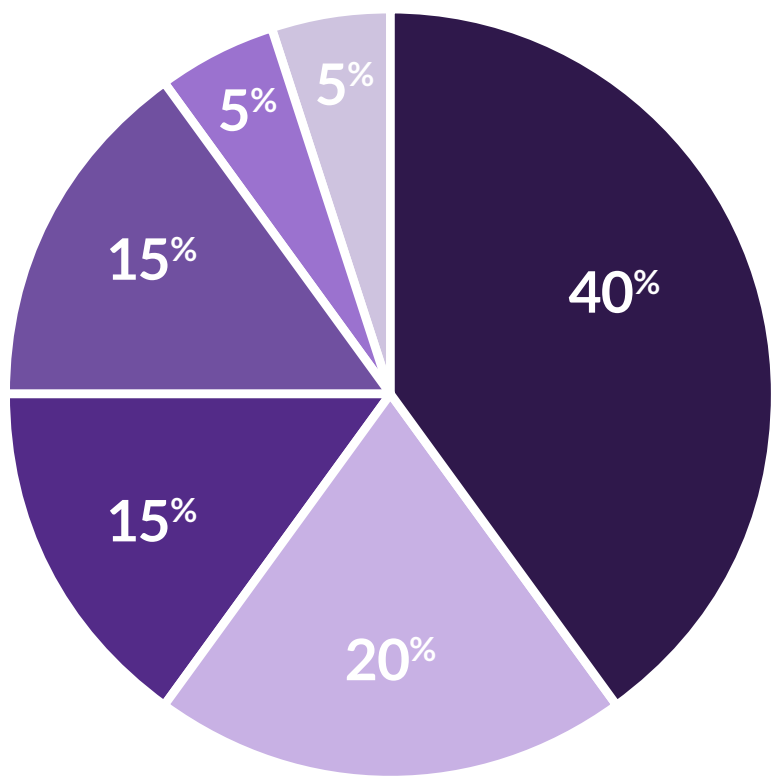
## VALIDITY

This research project explored how certain behaviors found in the Montessori environment are valid expressions of infant agency. There may be “expectancy effects” in that what is portrayed by the observation is due to expectations to see agency; however, it is deeply rooted in Montessori training to observe it. Therefore, the researcher’s years of training, experience, and expertise in the field of Montessori infant and toddler education and teacher education contribute to the interest in Montessori (Montessori, 2018) as well as the validity and trustworthiness (Stahl and King, 2020). A limitation is that observations occurred in one center, although separate rooms with differing staff members with varying years of experience provided opportunities for a diversity of experience. While the risks are minimal, the possibility of benefit is strong, as the aspiration to make a positive contribution to the lives of infants is a foundational inspiration for this study. As Somekh and Lewin (2005) indicated, research should benefit. If infant agency is validated through this study, the benefit to children, parents, the educational community, and society will be an increased understanding of the conditions within the Montessori environment that support agency and, perhaps, even a deeper understanding of agency itself.

“To observe it is necessary to be ‘trained,’ and this is the true way of approach to science. For if phenomena cannot be seen it is as if they did not exist, while, on the other hand, the soul of the scientist is entirely possessed by a passionate interest in what he sees. He who has been ‘trained’ to see, begins to feel interest, and such interest is the motive-power which creates the spirit of the scientist (Montessori, 2018, p. 67).”

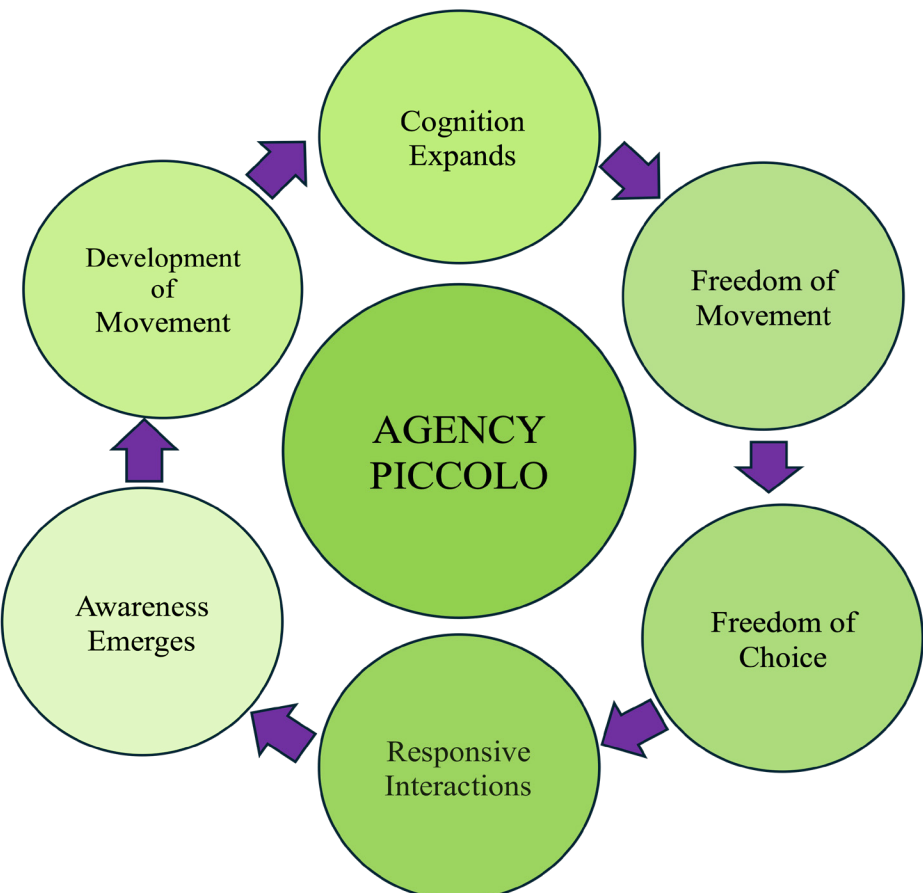
## FINDINGS

Research on infants and agency is underexplored, with almost none exploring agency without using a mechanism, physical apparatus, brain scan, brain mapping, simulations, or electromagnetic device. The data collected in this study did not use any of these devices but instead relied on observation in the naturalistic setting of the Montessori infant environment at a Montessori center. The narratives used seven foundational pillars of Montessori as a lens to identify and describe agential behavior in infants during case study observations. Movement and perseverance were the most frequently observed as primary expressions during the observation. Self-regulation was not observed.



## EXPRESSIONS OF AGENCY

- |                    |                      |
|--------------------|----------------------|
| ■ Movement 40%     | ■ Choice 5%          |
| ■ Perseverance 20% | ■ Concentration 5%   |
| ■ Independence 15% | □ Self-Regulation 0% |
| ■ Repetition 15%   |                      |



## THE DEVELOPMENTAL PROCESS OF “AGENCY PICCOLO” (LITTLE AGENCY IN INFANTS)

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## DISCUSSION

This study explored the nature of infant agency in a Montessori environment to fill the gap and add to the literature and theories of agency asserting that infants can be agential. The narrative descriptions of case studies used six pillars of Montessori to describe how infants expressed agency in a Montessori environment. This process revealed how the Montessori environment sets the conditions for agency to flourish. As was seen in the previous studies by Salamon et al. (2017) and Duhn (2022), infant agency can be seen in a natural setting, with movement (Bednarski et al., 2022) revealed to be the most frequent expression of agency among infants four to 18 months old. To date, there is limited research focusing on agency in infants and even less on Montessori programs and infant agency, which this study addressed, serving as foundational research on which others may build. The narratives lift the veil that masks agency from being recognized in infancy as these infants reveal actions that highlight agency in their infant behavior, thereby creating further opportunities for more research in Montessori and non-Montessori early education settings in what may become a rich field of inquiry and a new era for viewing agency in infancy.

## CONCLUSIONS

The study found agency is present in infants and can be seen through their experience in the Montessori infant environment. This research highlights the previously rarely seen habitat of the Montessori infant environment and the agency expressed by the little people who inhabit it. If parents—along with educators, teacher-educators, childcare providers, regulators, legislators, and policymakers—understand that infant agency does and can exist and that certain conditions, for example, those present in a Montessori infant environment such as the infant floor bed, support agentic development, there could be an increased demand for Montessori infant programs to support such experiences for young children and regulations to support it. Thus, more schools and childcare centers might be inspired to open Montessori infant programs, which will expand the circle of influence that Montessori infant programs have on the infants and families who attend and on the lives those infants will lead as they grow and develop with agency as a central role in their own lives.

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