What is the Rationale and Evidence Base

for Student Agency?

Maureen O'Rourke & Penny Addison

EdPartnerships International, 2017

Why Learner Agency - The Evidence Base

Research has found that students who have agency in their learning are more motivated, experience greater satisfaction in their learning, and, consequently, are more likely to achieve academic success (Williams, 2017, p. 10). There is an extensive evidence base that has identified what occurs for students when they have stronger agency in their educational lives:

- They have higher educational attainment and educational success (Buchmann & Steinhoff, 2017; Wigfield, Eccles, Fredricks, Simpkins, Roeser, & Schiefele, 2015; Otis, Grouzet, & Pelletier, 2005; Wang & Eccles, 2011);

- They experience deeper learning and can solve problems they've never seen before. (Fullan, Hill, & Roncón-Gallardo, 2017; DET, 2017);

- They experience more personally and socially relevant and rigorous learning when positioned as co-designers who have a role in enacting the curriculum (Shawer, 2010);

- They go beyond engagement to enact real decision making and experience a strong sense of a community, where a willingness to learn together is evident. (DET, 2017);

- Their capabilities and dispositions as successful learners increase – they become more self-motivated, self-directed and deeply engaged learners (Hannon, 2011);

- They work harder, set higher goals, are more likely to choose challenging tasks, are better at planning, have greater focus and more interest, and are less likely to give up (Johnston, 2004);

- They employ metacognitive, motivational and behavioural self-regulation capabilities to make greater learning progress (Siddall, 2016); and are empowered to leverage resources and technologies to make contributions to their learning communities, which include learning materials and ongoing direct feedback where such contributions inform curriculum (Hetherington, 2015).

There is also a strong evidence base of studies that have identified key drivers of achievement motivation as being people's views of themselves as having efficacy, agency, and integrity as (see Williams, 2017; Bandura, 1978; Cohen & Sherman, 2014; Steele, 1988).

Agency therefore clearly matters if contemporary goals of education are to be achieved and students are to genuinely develop as successful lifelong learners in all aspects of their lives. An orientation towards student agency is embedded in the *Melbourne Declaration on Educational Goals for young Australian*s (promoting equity and excellence; and enabling young Australians to become successful learners, creative and confident individuals, active and informed citizens), which is a foundation for the Australian and Victorian Curriculum.

Without agency, students tend to be positioned as passive learners who are complying with what a system of education thinks is good for them. They may 'perform' on valued measures but this is no guarantee that they are being well prepared for rich and rigorous learning lives that they can pursue independently and collectively with others. Many students with capability do not have the will to perform and they are appearing in data sets as disengaged learners who can be underachieving or still achieving (Hannon, 2011). Strengthening student agency in their education supports a paradigm shift from compliance and disengagement to commitment, motivation and deep intellectual engagement in learning.

A word of caution can be found in the literature that raises concerns about school improvement (a concern of the system) being the main driver for student agency and voice – it is important to ensure that opportunities and possibilities for agency also enable students to address their own concerns. Fielding (2010) notes that students have often been co-opted into research and development partnerships with adults for purposes 'far removed from emancipation' or empowerment. He contrasts 'high performance schooling' with 'person-centred education' noting that the drivers of each can be at odds with one another. He argues for a more active partnership between young people and adults that 'goes beyond consultation to embrace a participatory mode in which young people's voices are part of more dialogic, reciprocal ways of working' (p.62). He also challenges us to look at the drivers for student voice and agency and whether 'creativity and the engagement with young people as persons is the harbinger of a much richer, more demanding fulfilment of education for and in a democratic society' (p. 65).

Attending to student agency goes beyond beyond engagement, motivation and student voice (which can position students to be in service to the organisation and co-opt their ideas for adult agendas), to embrace a stronger paradigm shift where students are positioned to be active agents in both designing and creating their educational trajectories. This will require some rethinking of the roles and

relationships between students, teachers and other adults as well as the kinds of possibilities and learning opportunities they encounter. The leverage provided by access to digital technologies means that the learning environments and people students can collaborate with and learn from can extend into local and global communities.

Toshalis & Nakkula (2012) concur and identify additional impacts in their review of research on student motivation, engagement and agency:

> *… the more educators give students choice, control, challenge, and collaborative opportunities, the more motivation and engagement are likely to rise. The enhancement of agency has been linked to a variety of important educational outcomes, including: elevated achievement levels in marginalized student populations (Borjian & Padilla 2010; Gilligan 1993; Noguera & Wing 2006; Rodríguez 2008; Wren 1997), greater classroom participation (Garcia et al. 1995; Rudduck & Flutter 2000), enhanced school reform efforts (Fielding 2001; Mitra 2003; Mitra 2004), better self-reflection and preparation for improvement in struggling students (Leachman & Victor 2003), and decreases in behavioral problems (Freiberg & Lamb 2009). (p. 27-28)*

Lin-Siegler, Dweck & Cohen (2016) cite research findings that identify what underpins student agency, namely beliefs about themselves and what it takes to be successful at school:

> *… students' beliefs about themselves, their environment, and what it takes to succeed in intellectual pursuits can influence their motivation and, as a result, their performance in school. This means that shaping these beliefs can potentially affect students' academic motivation and performance… optimally motivated students will seek challenging tasks, self-regulate effectively as they work on the tasks, and show resilience when they hit setbacks. They will invest more effort, find new strategies, or seek help if they get stuck. (p. 295-296)*

The Ontario Ministry of Education has emphasised a way to shift beyond student voice to embrace student partnerships (Student Achievement Division, 2013; Fielding 2012). Their efforts have been informed by the research of Watkins (2009), who found that not only do motivation and perseverance grow when students are active in making decisions about their learning, but that new and more in-depth learning is also an outcome (p. 3). The development of strong student partnership approaches required pedagogical shifts that included rethinking of identities of what it means to be a student or teacher.

Four key actions were taken to navigate the challenges and tensions that arose as teachers grappled with the implications of what they perceived as curriculum and reporting demands while investigating/experimenting with new pedagogical approaches that created the space for students to have more autonomy in their own learning. These were:

1. Connecting the whole school community;
2. Fostering reciprocal relationships with students;
3. Exploring a pedagogical mindset;
4. Co-creating a responsive learning environment (Fielding, 2007, pps. 3-7).

Indicators of what students might 'do', 'feel' or 'be' in such learning environments included:

Do	Feel	Be
Participate in issues that matter to them	Learner autonomy and agency	In the driver seat of their own learning
Shape and contribute to their learning environment	Self-efficacy and collective efficacy	Self-regulated
Belong in meaningful partnerships	Respect and belonging	Curious and engaged
	Motivated and connected to their environment	An active citizen

(Adapted from p. 7)

An initial focus on Student Voice in the UK has now moved more strongly into the realm of agency by movements such as:

- *Students as Co-Researchers – where teachers identify issues they wish to explore and seek the active support of young people, not only in carrying out the research but also in helping to reflect in its processes, and make meaning from the data gathered so that recommendations for change and future action can be made.*

- *Students as Researchers – where the originating impulse and ongoing dynamic of the research, enquiry or evaluation come from the students themselves. They, with the support of adults, design and carry out the research and see it through to the often problematic later stages of meaning-making,*

recommendations, and dialogue with those in positions of relative power or influence to bring about desired changes. (Fielding, 2010, p. 63)

- *Students as Learning Partners – where teachers and their students observe aspects of learning (rather than teaching). Students are prepared to use observation techniques, as well as learn how best to develop a climate of trust with their teachers and the kind of language they might use when discussing observation data. This has resulted in a depth and range of fresh insight and understanding developing between teachers and students, more generous attitudes toward each other and greater self-awareness and self-knowledge of all involved (pps. 67-68).*

- *Student Action Teams – which illustrate collective agency where students identify issues of concern or aspiration within their local communities and lead on the process of research and resolution (p. 63).*

(This is an extract is from O'Rourke, M & Addison, A. (2017). *Report on Options for Development of a Victorian Student Agency & Leadership Framework.* Developed for the Department of Education and Training, Victoria).

References

Bandura, A. (1978). Self-efficacy: Toward a unifying theory of behavioral change. *Advances in Behaviour Research and Therapy*, 1, 139–161.Online: http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/0146-6402(78)90002-4

Buchman, M., & Steinhoff, A. (2017). 'Co-Development of Student Agency Components and its impact on educational attainment – theoretical and methodological considerations'. *Research in Human Development*, 14, 96-105.

Cohen, G. L., & Sherman, D. K. (2014). The psychology of change: Self-affirmation and social psychological intervention. *Annual Review of Psychology*, 65, 333–371. http://dx.doi.org/10.1146/annurev-psych-010213-115137.

DET (2017). *NPDL Victorian Cluster Report* (Draft Only).

Fielding, M. (2012). Beyond student voice: Patterns of partnership and the demands of deep democracy. Connect, 197, 10-15.

Fielding, M. (2010). The radical potential of student voice: Creating spaces for restless encounters. International Journal of Emotional Education, 2(1), 61-73.

Fielding, M. (2007). Carving a new order of experience: A preliminary appreciation of the work of Jean Rudduck in the field of student voice. Education Action Research, 323–336.

Fullan, M., Hill, P., & Roncón-Gallardo, S. (2017). Deep Learning: Shaking the Foundations. Ontario, Canada: Fullan, M., Quinn, J., & McEachen, J.(eds) Retrieved from http: ://npdl.global/wp-context//uploads/2017/03/npdl-case_study_3.pdf

Hannon, V. (2011). *Learning Futures*. OECD/CERI. Online: http://www.oecd.org/edu/ceri/Valerie%20Hannon.Learning%20Futures.pdf

Johnston, P.H. (2004). *Choice Words. How Our Language Affects Children's Learning*. Portland ME:Stenhouse.

Lin-Siegler, X., Dweck, C., & Cohen, G. (2016). Instructional interventions that motivate classroom learning. *Journal of Educational Psychology, 108 (3), 295-299.*

Otis, N., Grouzet, F. M. E., & Pelletier, L. G. (2005). Latent motivational change in an academic setting: A 3-year longitudinal study. *Journal of Educational Psychology*, 97(2), 170–183.

Shawer, S. F. (2010). 'Classroom-level curriculum development: EFL Teachers as curriculum-developers, curriculum-makers and curriculum-transmitters'. *Teaching and Teacher Education*, 26, 173-184

Siddall, T. (2016). The Power of Student Agency in Assessment and Learning: Learning how to learn with WestEd's Student Agency in Assessment & Learning Project. Online: http://nextgenlearning.org/blog/power-student-agency-assessment-and-learning

Steele, C. M. (1988). Advances in experimental social psychology. In L.Berkowitz (Ed.), *The psychology of self-affirmation: Sustaining the integrity of the self* (Vol. 21, pp. 261–302). New York, NY: Academic Press.

Toshalis, E. & Nakkula, J. (2012). Motivation, Engagement, and Student Voice. *Students at the Centre Series*. Online: http://studentsatthecenterhub.org/wp-content/uploads/2012/04/Motivation-Engagement-Student-Voice-Students-at-the-Center-1.pdf

Wang, M. T., & Eccles, J. (2011). Adolescent behavioral, emotional, and cognitive engagement trajectories in school and their differential relations to educational success. *Journal of Research on Adolescence*, 22(1), 31–39.

Watkins, C. (2009). Learners in the driving seat. *Leading Learning Pedagogy*, 1(2), 28-31.

Wigfield, A., Eccles, J. S., Fredricks, J. A., Simpkins, S., Roeser, R. W., & Schiefele, U. (2015). Development of achievement motivation and engagement. In R. M. Lerner (Eds.), *Handbook of child psychology and developmental science* (7th ed., pp. 1–44). New York, NY: John Wiley & Sons, Inc.

Williams, P. (2017). Student agency for powerful learning. *Knowledge Quest*, 45(4), 9-16.