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“I never teach my students. I only attempt to provide the conditions in which they can learn.”

—Albert Einstein

CHAPTER **ONE**

WHAT IS STUDENT AGENCY?

THERE IS SOMETHING wonderful going on in schools. When given the opportunity, students are taking greater ownership of their work. Students are talking, thinking, collaborating, and making change happen. On the world stage, there is a surge in youth activism. Children are speaking out about issues that are meaningful to them. Malala Yousafzai, Greta Thunberg, Robby Novak, aka “Kid President,” Xiuhtezcatl Martinez, to name just a few, are all using their voices to make an impact. For many of our students, these are their role models. If we want students to aspire to this level of agency, it all begins when we teach children to question, inquire, learn, and advocate for what they believe in. As educators, it is our job to create the curricula in which students can be their generation’s leaders. While not everyone will make the cover of *Time* magazine, or be nominated for a Nobel Prize like Malala and Greta, our classrooms can nevertheless be the incubators for this level of engagement. In this book we show you how. Let’s follow Einstein’s example and create the conditions for learning.

IN THIS CHAPTER

Research on Agency

Giving Students
Access, Language, and Choice

Research on Agency

Agency is a concept addressed in many fields, including sociology, psychology, and education. It has research behind it, a trail of scholarly articles, is a hot topic trending on social media, and is highlighted at professional conferences—yet it remains an elusive concept for many educators. This book gives this concept shape and clarity so that it can be operative day to day for teachers and their students, whether onsite or for distance learning. Therefore, let's begin with the question: What does it mean to work with a sense of agency? We'll take a tour of what researchers have had to say.

Students have agency when they are able to make choices, act on those choices, and know that their teachers trust them to pursue what has captivated them.



Although the word *agency* exists far back in history, it wasn't until the late 1980s that it came into greater relevance in the social sciences and education field. At Stanford University, psychologist Albert Bandura developed a theory of social cognition that he associated with self-efficacy. He later examined more specifically the role of agency and motivation, and coined the term “agentic”—in which people are viewed as self-organizing, proactive, self-reflecting, and self-regulated (Bjerede & Gielniak, 2017). In *What Is Agentic Learning and Why Is It Important?*, Bjerede & Gielniak state: “Agentic learning is defined by self-directed actions aimed at personal growth and development based on self-chosen goals. Within this context, students initiate actions of their own volition that drive their learning.”



Students take ownership of their work when they are given the opportunity.

“Agentic learning is defined by self-directed actions aimed at personal growth and development based on self-chosen goals.”

—Bjerede & Gielniak, 2017



When learners connect to the curriculum in meaningful ways, community and student agency thrives.

The Role of Choice in Achieving Goals

The ability to choose and make decisions is central to teaching and learning.

In the seminal book *Choice Words* (2004), researcher Peter Johnston states, “Children should leave school with a sense that if they act, and act strategically, they can accomplish their goals. I call this feeling a sense of agency.” He continues:

In the talk of the classroom, we want to hear threads of a dynamic view of intellect—indeed, of self. We want to inoculate the children against infection by fixed theories; we want them to say “I’m not good at this yet,” and to take steps to change that.

Johnston’s work influences our teaching practices and the themes of this book, because he reminds us that children aren’t born to chase grades but to develop their identities, unique strengths, and imaginations.



The teaching practices of earlier decades no longer apply, because our students are going out into a world that prizes innovation over compliance.



Agency isn't merely a can-do attitude—it involves the ability to act strategically and access the proper strategies to problem-solve and persevere.

Researchers Dale Schunk and William Bursuck (2015) and Peter Afflerbach (2016) help us understand agency as belief in one's control combined with knowing one can access the right strategies:

Self-efficacy refers to one's perceived capabilities for learning or performing actions at designated levels; agency is the belief that one can exert a large degree of control over important events in one's life; and volition refers to the belief that one can successfully implement strategies to attain important goals. As applied to reading, students' motivation is apt to be higher when they believe that they are capable of performing well, can control their success in reading, and can implement strategies that help keep them engaged.

In his book *Excellent Sheep*, William Deresiewicz, (2010, p. 13) helps us understand agency by exploring its opposite: students who have been taught that to be an educated person begins and ends with “doing your homework, getting the answers, acing the test.” The result? They lack meaning and purpose. “They’ve learned to ‘be a student,’ not to use their minds.”

Jeff Wilhelm, Tanya Baker, and Julie Dube (2001) expand this idea that compliance is hazardous when they write, “students are frequently denied the opportunities, tools, and authentic learning contexts that could motivate and engage them and prepare them to be ‘active and ethical agents’ in society.”

Educator and author Patty McGee (personal communication, 2019) defines agency with simplicity when she says, “Agency is ownership in action.” We like this wording because it reminds us that agency develops in students once they can drive learning; agency is doing, individuals acting upon their world.

“Children should leave school with a sense that **if they act, and act strategically**, they can accomplish their goals.”

—Peter Johnston

“Agency is ownership in action.”

—Patty McGee

Students identify insects in their local environment that need protection from harmful pesticides.



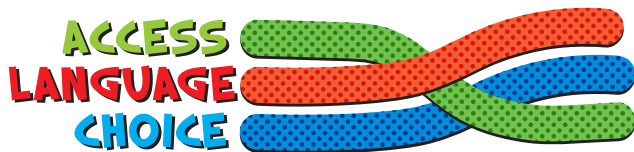
Jill listens to sixth-grade student Natalie as she describes her writing project about her adoption from China.



Giving Students Access, Language, and Choice

Now let's shift to what agency looks and sounds like in the classroom, and the essential beliefs involved. We like to describe agency as a belief system that says your actions can and will make an impact. Students who exhibit agency feel valued; they operate with choice and a sense of freedom. They keep learning and trying to achieve because they have conviction that their work matters, and they have personal power because their teachers embrace their identities, their histories, and their differences.

They keep learning
and trying to
achieve because
they have
conviction that
their work matters.



Access, Language, and Choice

There are three beliefs in educating children that run throughout teaching to foster agency:

Giving Access—students get what they need when they need it (independently or with support) and are also given access to the time needed to think

Developing Language—language is used as a vehicle to foster safety, empathy, equity, and trust between teachers and learners

Providing Choice—learners are given choice in terms of deciding content, how they approach a task, strategies to use, with whom they work, and so on

It is important that we plan, teach, and check to see that these elements are alive and well throughout the year. We showcase them often, so you can reflect on how these beliefs are being set into action day-to-day.

There are **three beliefs in educating children** that run throughout teaching to foster agency: giving access, developing language, and providing choice.



Avarie experiments with making slime. Students need access to materials and the freedom to try out their own ideas.



James Britton said, “Talk is the sea upon which all else floats.” (1970, p. 15). How we teachers use language is critical. It either opens up learners or shuts them down.

Access

Providing instruction does not automatically mean that you have provided access for your students. To do this, you have to incorporate student-centered topics, tools, and classroom experiences, and make sure that every student has equal access. Students also need access to time, to allow for processing, exploration, and talk. And students need access to you, and to your belief in their strengths and capabilities.

Language

Language is an important way to build relationships and let students know how we feel about them. If we acknowledge them, it lets them know that they are seen—and follow-up questions let them know they are heard.



MODELING

In the beginning, you will want to model your thinking and process for this work, so learners hear the language and see authentic work in action:

- Ahead of time, make a detailed plan of a particular activity or behavior you wish to see students do.
- Explicitly share this information with your students (think-aloud, role-playing, fishbowl, etc.).
- Have students practice right away.
- For a closing, have students share observations or insights.

Look for mini-lessons and introductory lessons throughout this book for examples of modeling.



Choice is at the heart of student agency.

Choice

Choice allows students to exert a healthy degree of control in their learning processes and room to change course once they are in the midst of working. Kimberly Gosselin, a literacy coach in a dual-language magnet school, explains it this way:

Simply providing students with choices isn't enough. To grow agency, teachers must create an environment for students that supports them in building both their social and academic identities. Teachers need to provide safe opportunities for students to take risks, inquire, and experiment with their choices in order for them to be able to truly own their learning lives and develop their sense of agency throughout their educational career.

Looking Ahead

In the next chapter, we explore the four components of W.I.R.E., a metacognitive framework that is designed to make both teaching and learning more fulfilling for all.

“Student agency means that students are **driving their own learning** by having a voice and having choices.”

—Carolyn Kelly, Grade 1 Teacher