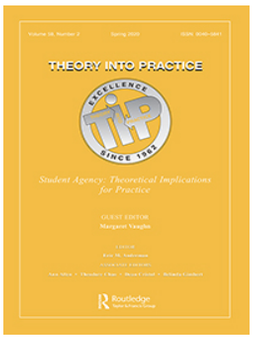

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What is student agency and why is it needed now more than ever?

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ABSTRACT

In this article, research tracing the historical progression of agency within recent educational reforms and empirical research from a variety of classrooms (geographic regions and grade levels) is discussed to document the power of agency across contexts. This article aims to propose a collaborative way of thinking about student agency from across the literature and provides insight into how to promote agency in classrooms today. The main focus is placed on examining structures and supports conducive to supporting student agency.

Ms. Reyes, a first grade teacher, teaching in the Pacific Northwest, is sitting down conducting a read aloud on volcanoes to kick off her science unit. Her students sit on the carpet and get ready to hear the informational text. Before starting, Ms. Reyes asks students to share and pair with one another and tell what they know about volcanoes. Ms. Reyes walks around the room and hears students excitedly share personal accounts of recent visits to Mount St. Helens and Mount Hood. She stops her instruction and shares with students, "I hear so many interesting ideas, what should we do?" One student says, "Write our own stories." Another student says, "Interview friends." Yet another student says, "See if there are still volcanoes there." Ms. Reyes says to students, "Okay, let's figure out what you need to get started on developing your ideas."

Opportunities to capitalize on students' ideas, questions, and interests like this are central to supporting and cultivating student agency in classrooms. Exchanges like this where teachers like Ms. Reyes have the opportunity to build upon students' ideas, experiences, and their agency happen frequently during classroom instruction. Ms. Reyes seized this moment and reshaped her instruction to support her students' interests and incorporate students' background experiences into the lesson. Her flexible and adaptive approach was essential to cultivating this opportunity for student agency. In this way, agency in the context of schooling, is multi-dimensional: it extends beyond individuals pursuing their interests to strengthening learning contexts where students' cultures, languages, and interests are in the foreground and where students and teachers co-create learning contexts together.

However, scholars emphasize that the structural inequality in schools seldom leads to contexts where students have agency (Donnor & Shockley, 2010). Instead, students have been discouraged and/or denied agency in schools particularly students of color, students who are living in poverty, and students from homes where English is not the primary language (Flores & Rosa, 2015; Leeman, 2005, in press). Recent educational reform efforts

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have exacerbated restrictive contexts for teachers resulting in significantly narrowed learning experiences for students not conducive to fostering student agency (e.g., National Governors Association Center for Best Practices & Council of Chief State School Officers, 2010; No Child Left Behind [NCLB], 2001; Department of Education, 2009). Moreover, daily images of an educational system plagued by deficit-oriented perspectives dominates the media, espousing public school incompetence, and the supposed benefits of proceduralized educational efforts, despite evidence of dedicated teachers, administrators, and students who accomplish outstanding feats. What could happen in schools if we centered educational reform efforts on creating agentic spaces for students in schools? What would classrooms look like for students, teachers, and communities?

Articles in this themed issue come from researchers, teacher educators, and practicing K-12 educators from a variety of institutions aimed at addressing these questions. The central focus of this issue is to provide a discussion of student agency across multiple contexts and disciplines. As debates about engaging and supporting students' instructional needs, cultures, languages, and histories abound, this issue will provide insight into a compelling aspect of classroom instruction.

In this introductory article, a model of agency, rooted in theory and practice is conceptualized. A collaborative way of thinking about how teachers, teacher educators, and school leaders can promote agency in schools within today's highly charged educational landscape is shared to explore this elusive but important dimension of classroom practice. Subsequent articles in this themed issue focus on a variety of dimensions of agency across diverse contexts. As the authors in this issue conceptualize agency across multiple perspectives, we invite you to engage in thinking about the potential of agency and what it might mean for students, teachers, and communities.

What is student agency?

Historically, human agency has long been discussed in the literature. Dewey (1922) argued that choice and deliberation embody one's agency and characterize human nature rather than behaviorism and determinism. Vygotsky (1978) stated that through the use of tools and social practices individuals take up agency as they negotiate and interact within social contexts. Viewed from a social cognitive perspective, Bandura (1986, 2001), highlighted that agency is associated with an individual's self-efficacy and strive for control of their learning activities. Other perspectives emphasize how individuals contest institutional norms and sanctioned practices to support their agency (Garcia, Mirra, Morrell, Martinez, & Scorza, 2015) or depict agency as a motivational concept allowing for individuals to make choices and decisions (Reeve & Tseng, 2011; Wigfield et al., 2015). Yet, other scholars have determined that agency is rooted in how individuals reshape their worlds and construct identities (Holland, Lachicotte, Skinner, & Cain, 2001) and are cultivated through the use of dialogue and language.

Building from these theoretical orientations, a model of agency presented here, emphasizes that agency is associated with: (a) dispositional dimensions of individuals who act and transform environments; (b) motivational dimensions of individuals who regulate their actions, exist within contexts, and make choices and decisions; and (c) positionality of individuals in that individuals negotiate and interact within complex social contexts. In

the following, each dimension is further discussed with classroom examples to conceptualize a model of student agency in practice.

Dispositional

Agency relies on students' personal dispositions, such as the extent to which students can act as entrepreneurial, generative, creative (Tran & Vu, 2018), goal-directed, determined (Bandura, 2001), or resistant (Reyes, 2009). Oakeshott and Fuller (2001) suggested that agency is "having an understanding of [herself] himself in terms of [her] his wants and [her] his powers and creates opportunities" (p. 35). In that, those who act with agency are often thought to be entrepreneurial, often taking the initiative to act and to create opportunities. Individuals must have a willingness to act and be purposeful in their actions. On this dimension, developing a sense of agency has to do with having *intentions* and *purpose*. Consider the following classroom scenario where students in Ms. Nelson's third-grade class demonstrate this dimension of agency as they act on an idea to develop a school-wide project.

Recently, while observing Ms. Nelson's classroom when after reading the book, *Crenshaw* by Katharine Applegate, a story about a family experiencing homelessness, Marcus, a third-grade student shared, "We should start our own foodbank." Listening to Marcus' idea, Ms. Nelson responded, "Let's think together as a class to see how we can do this." Marcus got a large piece of bulletin board paper, wrote his ideas down, and then asked students to share their ideas. After listening to students' responses and reading his own, Marcus wrote down three ideas (a) make signs for the school and outside of the school; (b) write about creating a foodbank for the class newsletter and (c) talk about developing a foodbank on the school's morning announcements. Ms. Nelson facilitated and organized the class into three teams to work on the outlined tasks. What followed was a three week integrated project where students organized and developed a foodbank in the school. Central to this opportunity for student agency, was the role of students having intentions and a purpose and their teacher listening and guiding these ideas and intentions. In this way, students possessed the dispositions of being generative and creative and were intent on pursuing their ideas.

Motivational

The second dimension of agency focuses on students' ability to regulate their actions and ideas, and to reflect on their own skills (Bandura, 2001). As a result, agency has to do with *persisting* and *choice-making* as individuals learn how to make decisions and choices to complete tasks and to act on opportunities even when obstacles are presented. Adair (2014) echoed this dimension stating that agency is "expanding what people have the potential to be and do, [and] that people have choices in terms of what they achieve and who they want to become" (p. 224). For example, consider how this dimension of agency was orchestrated in Mr. Freeland's fourth-grade classroom, when Mazzy noticed the large amount of waste produced at lunch and the lack of recycling going on in the school.

Mazzy left the lunchroom, took out her notebook, and wrote down a plan for a school recycling program. Later that afternoon, Mazzy shared her ideas with her teacher. Although her teacher was supportive of the idea, Mazzy was discouraged because the

school's principal suggested that she get the approval of the student council who was not receptive to the idea. Rather than giving up, Mazzy scheduled meetings over the next month with student council members and talked about the importance of recycling in the cafeteria. During this experience, Mazzy persisted and was faced with a choice to abandon her idea or to continue despite the student council's opposition. Student agency often requires that students make decisions in the face of perceived obstacles. In doing so, students must possess the motivation and willingness to make choices, persist, and act on their ideas and intentions despite any perceived obstacles they experience.

Positional

The third dimension of agency includes the ways in which individuals interact in the context of schooling and across a variety of social contexts. As a result, agency is not solely developed by an individual, but is co-created with other individuals such as peers and teachers and across a variety of social interactions and contexts. Agency in this realm has to do with *interactions* and *negotiations* as individuals decide to take [or not take] action to exert their influence. Agency, is not an isolated action where students exist in a vacuum, rather, agency is co-constructed in communities of practice (Lave & Wenger, 1991) as students adopt various identities in complex social situations and experiences. As individuals negotiate across these communities, they develop *perceptions* of themselves in relation to schooling (i.e., reader, writer, a certain type of learner, someone able to pursue their interests).

Consider in the following example, how agency works as part of a collective, not solely residing on an individual but part of a larger, interconnected system, co-created with peers, teachers, and community members. Second-grade students in Ms. Laxson's class decided to create dual language books in the students' Native American language, Niiumippu, and in English for the school after seeing there were no books written by members of their tribe in the school's library (Vaughn, 2016). Students brought their family members to school to help translate phrases in Niiumippu and Ms. Laxson invited tribal elders to share their stories with students. Student agency was collectively developed through these interactions as tribal elders, grandparents, family members, and community members were called upon to help co-write books that represented students' experiences, language, and cultural ways of knowing and learning specific to the tribe. This experience captures how student agency is interconnected across individuals and highlights how individuals are positioned. Students, elders, and family members were positioned as knowledgeable individuals and leaders in the learning context.

Consider another classroom scenario where these three dimensions of agency are at work.

In Ms. Nolan's third-grade class, during a literature discussion on *Zita the Spacegirl*, students decided that the character was "fiercer than Harry Potter." Ms. Nolan sat alongside the group and asked, "Why, tell me more?" What followed was a lively exchange between students as they pulled examples from the text and debated with one another about the strengths of each character. Some students made charts and created character maps while other students polled their classmates asking their perspectives and made a graph displaying the results. During learning activities like this, student agency is palpable, as students' voices and decisions drive classroom discussions and the teacher is an active listener, posing questions, and facilitating discussions as needed. In this way, Ms. Nolan was careful to work across the three dimensions of agency. She supported

efforts for students to share their perspectives and ideas (dispositional dimension of agency); she supported students in making choices about how they would express their ideas (motivational dimension of agency) and she cultivated a classroom context (positional dimension of agency) where students were encouraged to work together, to use ideas and perspectives of others, and were empowered to share their perspectives in a mode they chose (i.e., debate, class poll, chart).

As seen in Figure 1, dispositional, motivational, and positional dimensions of agency outline a model of agency in learning contexts. Teaching for agency requires that teachers balance and support students across these dimensions and support students in their ability to influence and impact the learning context through intentions, decisions, and actions with the goal of creating opportunities. At the core of student agency is the idea that in structuring classrooms to support agency, students' opportunities to exert influence in their environment increases. Educators can build upon students' dispositions, motivations, and positions in the context of the classroom when structuring learning opportunities. Drawing on my research with educators and the research of scholars who explore agency, the following are consistent elements associated with classrooms where students harness agency. In classrooms where agency is cultivated, teachers:

- Use dialogue that involves students in thinking about their involvement in the learning process (Johnston, 2004). For example, in rooms where teachers support student agency, you can often hear teachers say, "What do you need to pursue that idea," and "What can I do to support what you're doing?"
- Adopt a flexible and adaptive approach to teaching and thinking about students' instructional and social emotional needs (Vaughn, 2019; Vaughn & Parsons, 2013, 2016)

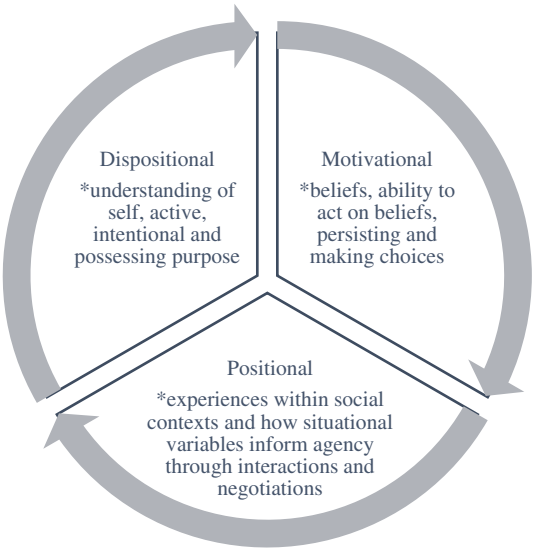

Figure 1. A model of student agency.

For example, Mr. Henshy uses targeted language in his discussions with his fourth grade students and adapts his instruction based on students' interests and feedback. The objective of this lesson included having students read articles on wind turbines and synthesize the benefits. However, one of the students shared, "I think they [wind turbines] are bad because they harm birds and bats." Listening to his student's question, Mr. Henshy put his lesson plan aside and wrote on the board, "What do you think and why?" and "What might happen if …" Open-ended questions like this are essential when planning instruction to support student agency. Throughout the lesson, Mr. Henshy walked around the room and listened to students and said, "Tell me more about why you think that." Such an example highlights the essential role of dialogue of both students and teachers when it comes to developing classroom spaces conducive to student agency. Mr. Henshy listened to his students' questions and thoughts and used targeted dialogue (i.e., Tell me more, why, why do you think that), to structure dialogue with students. In doing so, students were able to choose the direction of the learning context. Mr. Henshy picked up on his students' cues, adapted his instruction, and capitalized on this opportunity for agency. During this exchange, Mr. Henshy was adaptive and flexible in his approach to the instructional task at hand. In addition, teachers must also:

- Invite and integrate learning experiences to support students' linguistic and cultural backgrounds (Campano, Ghiso, Kannan, & Badaki, this issue; Vaughn, Hillman, McKarcher, & Latella, 2017)

For example, consider another teacher with whom I work in my research, Ms. Vincey, a sixth grade teacher, who works with multilingual students. Ms. Vincey invites students' linguistic and cultural backgrounds into the classroom. Throughout the school year, Ms. Vincey invites parents into her classroom to ask them to help develop and update multilingual dictionaries with students. In doing, so, Ms. Vincey capitalizes on the rich, third space between home and school (Gutiérrez, 2008). Parents and students are invited into the classroom to create a visual picture dictionary reflective of their languages for class use. These dictionaries are used daily during classroom instruction and in the upcoming year, students and parents are creating a collaborative dictionary for the school. Opportunities to invite students' cultures, languages, and ways of knowing into the curriculum are essential in cultivating student agency. Scholars emphasize the important role of students' histories, languages, and cultures when cultivating spaces for agency (Hatt & Urrieta, this issue).

- Situate learning in meaninful ways and relevant to students' interests and out of school lives (Dyson, 2020; Vaughn, 2018).

In Mr. Trenk's third-grade classroom, Sam, brings in a newspaper article about the creek by the school having high levels of pollution. Sam shares that the class should do something about it. Listening to Sam's concern, Mr. Trenk, asks the class what they should do. Students decide to take water samples from the creek by their school as well as the creeks by the local parks to evaluate pollution levels and then come up with an action plan to take to the city's parks commission. This opportunity to make learning relevant to students' interests is essential in cultivating spaces for agency. Similarly, in another

classroom, Ms. Gahn's fifth grade, Jamie, a fifth-grade student, shared how she saw coyotes during the weekend when she and her family went hunting while reading the story, *Hatchet*. Jamie shared that she and her family talked about staying away from coyotes and what to do if you see them when you are out. Another student shared his camping experience and how they had to watch out for mountain lions in this one area while camping. During this exchange the teacher opened the instructional floor and invited students to share more about their camping experiences. As a result, other students shared their experiences and Ms. Gahn extended the lesson to include a writing unit where students wrote personal narratives about their experiences.

- Cultivate a vision for teaching and a classroom culture that views students as co-collaborators and creative, knowledge generators (Vaughn & Faircloth, 2011, 2013; Vaughn et al., 2017)

In classrooms where student agency flourishes, teachers possess a vision of students as knowledge generators and individuals who can develop the skills of problem-solvers and advanced thinkers. Visioning can be a powerful tool for educators to use to conceptualize what and how to pursue student agency in their classroom. Visioning is an integration of a teacher's "passions, their hopes, and dreams with their knowledge about how and what children should be learning," (Duffy, 2002, p. 4). By structuring visions inclusive of agency, teachers can support opportunities where students have the ability to exert influence, transform, and expand opportunities in their environment. Such actions can be powerful experiences as students can become agents of change (Freire, 1994) and "give significance to the world in purposeful ways with the aim of creating, impacting, and/or transforming themselves, and/or the conditions of their lives" (Basu, Calabrese Barton, Clairmont, & Locke, 2009, p. 345).

Across these vignettes is the understanding that agency is socially constructed and a dynamic dimension of classroom learning that is continually reshaped with students and teachers. It is, "the strategic making and remaking of ourselves, identities, activities, relationships, cultural tools and resources, and histories, as embodied within relations of power," (Lewis, Enciso, & Moje, 2007, p. 18). Agency is structured *with* and *alongside* students and during experiences that allow for students to share their voice, histories, cultural identities, experiences, languages, and interests.

When classrooms allow for student agency, learning experiences move beyond a transactional approach of learning to one that is co-constructed and generative. Doing worksheets upon worksheets and adhering to prescriptive programs that emphasize a singular approach to student learning is the complete antithesis to agency. Teaching to fidelity to a standardized one-size fits all program does not cultivate student agency. What develops from this path, is a standardized and narrow curriculum which often omits students' rich out of school lives, cultures, languages, and histories. Examples of students using their agency include children offering their opinions about lesson topics, generating ideas, and having and using their intentions to design, problem solve, and inform their world. School leaders must engage teachers in discussions about facilitating agency with students. This can include supporting professional development where teachers learn from one another about structures and supports conducive to facilitating agency. Another strategy to supporting student agency in schools is for school leaders to develop school-wide structures such as a peer mentoring

system, and an idea exchange where students post ideas to implement school and community change. Moreover, teacher educators must have explicit discussions with preservice teachers on what agency is and observe classrooms where teachers are teaching for student agency. Teacher educators can invite practicing teachers to talk to preservice teachers about how to support student agency and can work alongside practicing classroom teachers to see how to balance supporting agency while meeting the demands of daily classroom life. Finally, teacher educators can engage in reflective practice with preservice teachers to challenge ideas about what agency is and isn't and problematize how existing structures detract from supporting agency in schools.

Conclusion

Opportunities in schools supportive of student agency can be found when students make choices, act on their intentions, and take actions in their efforts to develop their own stance in the learning context. In these environments, students are generative and positioned as knowledgeable leaders in the classroom and teachers work alongside their students to engage in flexible and adaptive teaching. Such contexts can provide rich, learning spaces for students and teachers.

Disclosure statement

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Additional Resources

1. Barton, A. C., & Tan, E. (2010). We be burnin'! Agency, identity, and science learning. *The Journal of the Learning Sciences, 19*, 187–229.

In this article, Barton and Tan explore the development of student agency in urban youth (ages 10–14) during community youth club focused on green energy technologies. One of the strengths of this article is the ways in which the authors examine and focus on students and the ways in which they initiated learning opportunities as they worked as "community science experts."

2. Ivey, G., & Johnston, P. H. (2013). Engagement with young adult literature: Outcomes and processes. *Reading Research Quarterly, 48*, 255–275.

Providing engaging contexts where students have the ability to make decisions is a central tenet of supporting student agency in classrooms. In this article, Ivey and Johnston, locate agency as students enacted their positions in the literacy classroom. Specific dimensions of agency that were found include five domains of agency: (1) agency in reading, (2) social agency, (3) moral agency, (4) agency with respect to one's life narrative, and (5) agency in self-regulation.

3. Vaughn, M., Premo, J.T., Sotirovska, V. Erickson, D. (2019). Evaluating agency in literacy using the Student Agency Profile (StAP). *The Reading Teacher.*

Understanding how student agency can be conceptualized by the students is an important next step in advancing the research and practice of student agency. In this article, authors describe the development of the Student Agency Profile (StAP), an instrument that can be used to measure student agency in literacy contexts that can be used by educators, scholars, and administrators.