Principals Sabbatical report

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How can schools use student agency to optimise educational outcomes for students?

Executive Summary

This report brings together all the strands of research, professional discussions, school visits and professional reflections I have undertaken during my sabbatical around the concept of student agency as a tool for optimising success for learners.

However as soon as I started to research my topic it automatically opened many new ideas to ponder and a chance to reflect once again on the research about " How student's learn" that has guided much of my teaching philosophy. My research took me back to the core business of my principal's role, that being to manage the learning environment of our school based on the science of how students best learn which can be so overlooked within the busyness of the principals' role.

1. My report firstly outlines the concept of student agency and how this fits within the NZC.
2. From this I returned to one of the most visionary educators whose work I used extensively as a framework for change in pedagogy and practice, that of Dr Julia Atkin as outlined in her paper "From Values & Beliefs about learning to principles and practice."
3. All of the concepts explored must primarily relate back to what matters most, that being "How do children learn best?" so time was spent reading and summarising John Hattie's texts on Visable Learning Research.
4. From this theoretical base, I then looked extensively at the different ways schools utilise student agency in their practice.
5. From this I drew together a likely overview of how our school might use this information as part of our next Inquiry Cycle reviewing our Strategic Plan and curriculum with student agency as a key component.

Purpose

The purpose for my project, looking into Student Agency came about due to the many, many changes we are currently facing in education in New Zealand. The key perspective in all of this change, whether it be ILE, Digital Technology or any other new idea has to be that of the students. Therefore, finding a successful way for students to have their say about their learning seemed paramount, no matter what new change was being investigated.

Having the opportunity to move aside from the busyness of leading a school gave me the chance and time to focus on our core business, the very heart of our purpose, "How do students learn" as a focal point to investigate any new pedagogy or practice. Much of my thinking has been directed by the key aspects of the two noted educational researchers, Dr Julia Atkin and John Hattie.

Sir Ken Robinson is also an educator who I follow consistency as a checkpoint for any new direction so I have also used some of his current work to be guiding principles for change.

I have also drawn on the current research from the Centre for Educational Research and Innovation on "How the learning sciences inform the design of 21st century learning environments."

Rationale and Background Information.

So What is Student Agency?

Learner agency is about students having the power, combined with choices, to take meaningful action and see the results of their decisions. Student Agency is about shifting the ownership of learning from teachers to students, enabling students to have the understanding, ability, and opportunity to be part of the learning design and to take action to intervene in the learning process, to affect outcomes and become powerful lifelong learners.

Student Agency is the capacity and propensity to take purposeful initiative—the opposite of helplessness. Young people with high levels of agency do not respond passively to their circumstances; they tend to seek meaning and act with purpose to achieve the conditions they desire in their own and others' lives. Students agency is the capacity of individuals to act independently and to make their own free choices.

"One way of thinking of learner agency is when learners have "the power to act". Agency is when learning involves the activity and the initiative of the learner, more than the inputs that are transmitted to the learner from the teacher, from the curriculum, the resources and so forth. In the past, our schools have catered mostly for groups of learners, for classes of kids, with a one size fits all approach. Arguably, many students felt disenfranchised in the midst of that, as they just had to sit and do what they were told. Lessons were delivered to students who were passive in the way that they received that. When learners move from being passive recipients to being much more active in the learning process, actively involved in the decisions about the learner then greater the agency. Students have a sense of agency when they feel in control of things that happen around them; when they feel that they can influence events. This is an important sense for learners to develop. They need to be active participants in their learning.

Derek Wenmoth, CORE Education 10 Trends

There's been a lot of talk in the past about learner-centric approaches to education and personalisation, and these are aspects of what we might mean by learner agency, but the concept goes deeper than this.

There are three things that are core features of our understanding of learner agency.
• The first is that agency involves the initiative or self-regulation of the learner. Before a learner can exercise agency in their particular learning context they must have a belief that their behaviour and their approach to learning is actually going to make a difference for them in the learning in that setting - in other words, a personal sense of agency. The notion of agency isn't simply about handing control over to the learner - a sort of abdication model - it involves a far greater tapestry of intentionality on the part of schools and teachers to create that context and environment

where the learners are actively involved in the moment by moment learning and wellbeing. However, it will be important for schools to consider the safeguards that will need to be in place to ensure no one is falling through the gaps under the guise of just "doing my own thing".

- Second, agency is interdependent. It mediates and is mediated by the sociocultural context of the classroom. It's not just about a learner in isolation doing their own thing and what suits them. Learners must develop an awareness that there are consequences for the decisions they make and actions they take, and will take account of that in the way(s) they exercise their agency in learning.
- And thirdly, agency includes an awareness of the responsibility of one's own actions on the environment and on others. So there's a social connectedness kind of dimension to that. Every decision a learner makes, and action she or he takes, will impact on the thinking, behaviour or decisions of others - and vice versa. You can't just act selfishly and call that acting with agency.

Hitlin and Elder suggest four overlapping conceptions of agency:
- Existential agency: The capacity, or free will, for exerting influence on our environments.
- Programmatic agency: Following rules and routines.
- Identify agency: What we believe about ourselves and the ways that we wish to be perceived by others.
- Life-course agency: Actions that we take to affect future outcomes.

So where does Student Agency fit with NZC

Learner agency is embedded in *The New Zealand Curriculum* key competencies as "the capabilities that young people need for growing, working, and participating in their communities.
"The school curriculum should challenge students to use and develop the competencies across the range of learning areas and in increasingly complex and unfamiliar situations"

NZC, Ministry of Education, 2007, p. 38

The New Zealand Curriculum key competencies are about developing the dispositions and sense of agency that empower the individual, and help them better understand and negotiate the perspectives and values of others, contributing towards more productive and inclusive workplaces and societies.
"Students are given explicit instruction in learning strategies (such as goal setting, self-monitoring and deliberate practice) that enable them to take control of their learning, develop meta-cognitive skills, self-regulate, and develop self-efficacy and agency."

ERO School Evaluation Indicators, Domain 4

Students must develop the capacity to engage strategically in their learning without waiting to be directed. They must take ownership of and responsibility for their learning. And, they must

possess the skills to learn independently, without heavy dependence on external structures and direction."

So why do we need to develop this in C21 learners ?

The concept of agency has been central to educational thinking and practice for centuries. The idea that education is the process through which learners become capable of independent thought which, in turn, forms the basis for autonomous action, has had a profound impact on modern educational theory and practice.

Agentic children turn into agentic adults. We have all heard the words "Successful people, act on their beliefs" and this is true in the light of agency. Therefore, the moral imperative lies not just in the social and emotional wellbeing — it is an innate characteristic that must be acknowledged and addressed.

Research shows that the more successful an educational system is in the traditional sense, the less likely it is to cultivate entrepreneurs. PISA scores, for example, have been found to be negatively correlated with nations' entrepreneurial confidence and activities (Zhao, 2012). The new economy needs learners and entrepreneurs who have adaptive expertise to be innovative, flexible, and creative in a variety of contexts.

For most of the past 200 years our education system has been oriented around the institution of schools and the position of teachers within them. The curriculum, timetable, organization of subjects etc. have all been oriented around the ways in which schools are designed and teachers operate.

A learner-oriented system instead places the learner at the center of all decision making. It provides support for learners that is respectful of and responsive to individual learner preferences, needs, and values. It supports the active involvement of learners and their families in the design and provision of educational services and in decision-making about what is learned, how learning occurs, and where learning takes place. An example of this is the vision of Ka Hikitia – Accelerating Success 2013–2017 , 'Māori enjoying and achieving education success as Māori'. This vision ensures that all Māori students, their parents and their whānau participate in and contribute to an engaging and enjoyable educational journey that recognises and celebrates their unique identity, language and culture.

In the early part of this century the nature of the distribution of human work was such that learning for all would have meant that many people were over-educated for the work available. Consequently, schools designed then were not intended for learning for all. Rather they tended to act as filtering and sorting systems selecting and holding on to those who were naturally effective learners in a school context – those who, in many ways, learned in spite of the teachers, in spite of the system. Little attention was paid to designing educational practices to support and enable all students to learn. What has been considered success in the past has been a narrow view of academic learning.

In fact, education in the early part of the century was designed to exclude. The impact of this legacy is still being experienced in schools. It takes quite a shift in mindset for schools to move from an approach and an attitude that expects many students to fail or do poorly to one which expects most students to succeed. If your expectation is that all or most students will succeed you will act in a way to ensure most people succeed. If someone is not progressing you will turn your attention to making sure that they do succeed. If your expectation is that only the minority will succeed, you will not put effort in when some students aren't succeeding because you expect and accept that many will not succeed.

In the 21 century the rapid growth in knowledge, the rate at which is replacing unskilled labour and the accelerating pace of change mean that all students need to learn and to learn to learn. Our responsibility, now, is to ensure that most students succeed in learning. Thus, a 'school for learning' at the end of the twentieth century has a very different focus from a 'school for learning' at the end of the nineteenth century.

Schools for Learning might ask "Aren't schools all for learning? Haven't they always been?". The answer is they have always been about 'learning for some' but not 'learning for all".

So how does this fit with what our school Values and Principles are?

Dr Julia Atkin, an educational expert who I was fortunate to hear speak several times during early 2000's during my time as an ICT facilitator frames a model for redeveloping and redefining our school practice and programme based on a solid foundation of

What do we value?
What do we believe about how people learn?
What do we need to do to improve our practice so that it more truly reflects our values and beliefs?

The essence of the approach Dr Atkin suggests is to balance the focus of our attention on the practice or action with a focus on the core values and beliefs of our school and the expression of these values and beliefs as principles or guidelines for action.

The points of reference are always:

 • **what do we value?**
• **what are the beliefs about learning which underpin a particular practice and are they reasonable beliefs based on current research on how we learn?**
• **how does our current practice help us achieve what we value?**
• **how will a suggested new, or different, practice improve our ability to achieve what we value and believe?**

As with many aspects of learning, the process of articulating and sharing our values and beliefs is critically important; the processes of imagining, trialing and evaluating new or different practices are essential to true growth and learning. In fact, it is not the formulated statements that make the difference. It is experiencing visioning and engaging in the process of evaluating your practices against what you value and believe.

Belief 1: In a climate of trust and mutual respect, humans inspire and encourage each other.

Principle: Express unconditional acceptance, love and have an expectation that all students will learn and improve. Demonstrate the gospel values in our school culture in all our school pedagogy, practices and programmes.

Practices:
In practice, this means putting a focus on relationships and the quality of those relationships based on the gospels values and our St Mary MacKillop charism.
At a personal level, it means being a 'warm demander', it means balancing 'care' and 'expectation' – it means having clear expectations and communicating these to each other – students to teachers, teachers to students, teachers to management, management to teachers, parents to school, school to parents.
It means creating and designing structures in schools in which authentic personal relationships can develop.

Belief 2: Humans move towards experiences from which they gain a sense of self-worth and achievement.

Principle: Ensure a focus on gaining a sense of achievement for all making "room for all to have their day in the sun".

Practices: Determine readiness

Set challenging but achievable tasks for each learner
Mistakes seen as part of learning
Regular feedback which emphasizes the positive and gives constructive and specific suggestions for improvement
Criterion formative based assessment, profile reporting on flexible curriculum structures which allow for progression on readiness.

Belief 3: Learner driven learning is more likely to be effective and meaningful

Principle: Maintain ownership by the learner, nurture a sense of agency and tap intrinsic motivation

Practices: Connecting with students' experiential knowledge, their personal story knowledge. Finding out what students know, what they want to know, how they want to learn and letting it influence your design
Learning experiences which have been designed with open ended aspects
Negotiating the curriculum - at a micro level in the classroom but also at the macro level by utilising the curriculum and giving students the opportunity to plan their own curriculum with parent and teacher guidance, Giving some choice to students.

Belief 4: Learning is constructing and reconstructing meaning from our experiences.

Principle: Honour learning as personal meaning making

Practices: Modelling being a 'learner' not a 'knower'
Exploring and manipulating concrete materials
Exploring real life situations
Exploring issues that are student issues
 Designing experiences which challenge student view of the world
Working from practice to theory Involving students in coming up with patterns and rules rather than imposing or simply stating them.
Encouraging learning from mistakes.
 Develop knowledge and understanding by building on what is known as Metacognition – reflecting on learning, thinking and teaching processes
Critical reflection on knowledge and actions of self and others
Time given to explore, discover, debate, question, design, practice

Belief 5: The human brain-mind-body system is capable of multiple ways of knowing.

'Knowing' is deepened and amplified when there is an integration of our ways of knowing.

Principle: Design learning experiences to integrate our many ways of knowing.

Practices: designing learning experiences to stimulate and integrate our many ways of knowing – to integrate experience, feelings, imagination, information and action.

 At a micro level it means integrating emotion, movement, image and sound. Practices which encourage expression of learning in a variety of ways - dance, drama, song, story, cartoon, poster, metaphor, essay, debate, theory, procedures – honour multiple ways of knowing.

Belief 6: Human psychic drives differ in different life phases

Principle : Match the nature of the learning experiences to the primary psychic task of the learners' lifespace.

 Practice: Curricula focused on the primary psychic task for the age group:

 Infancy: trust and belonging
Childhood: competence and playfulness
Early adolescence: identity
Young adulthood: intimacy vs isolation
Mid adulthood: stagnation vs generativity
Middle school programs designed around knowing self.

 How does John Hattie's research in to "Visible Learning, the Science of Learning" integrate into this philosophy allowing for student agency?

Teachers need to "Know Thy Impact" and teachers need to evaluate their impact and be seeking feedback on this impact. Achievement is maximized when teachers see learning through the eyes of students and students see learning through themselves as teachers.

Teachers need to set learner's appropriate challenges based on a clear understanding of where the student is at and their next step. This includes having high expectations that all students can learn while welcoming errors as opportunities to learn. Teachers need to be passionate about and promote the language of learning by being critical planners using learning intentions and success criteria aiming for surface and deep outcomes which they communicate to students

John Hatties' Keys for Visible learning

- Trusting environments
- Personal goals involving students taking them from where they are now to their next step.
- Deliberate acts of teaching including a range of strategies integrating equipment, tools and ICT.
- Students know how and when to concentrate
- Develop confidence to be learners
- Have multiple learning strategies
- Give feedback about learning

When students are aware of nature of success (what is looks like) greater learning will happen.

How do we get students to want to learn, want to attain the success criteria and want to be challenged.

Learning within the classroom

- Teachers need to understand how difficult tasks are for beginners
- Find ways to encourage to build confidence
- Invest effort to learn various strategies to think plus learn
- Need to give explicit teaching, over and over using Reggie Routman's , "I do , I do, we do, you do model" for explicit teaching.
- To maximise time needed to provide many opportunities to learn and not "just doing something"
- Students want to be taught by a teacher who shows a constructive focus on learning, directly helps themselves through monitoring and feedback, preferring sensible and concise explanations about how to proceed and how to understand the tasks expected of them. Students being helped to achieve independence and autonomy, appreciate teachers who can connect with the new with the familiar, convey complex notions in simple terms, recognize that student learn at different levels, varying levels of guidance , feedback and instruction.

One of the major principles of learning is that the learner needs to make an active response to the source of learning. When the mind is focused observational learning can produce powerful outcomes.The teachers role is to invite and induce students to engage students to engage actively with learning sources.

Assessment information is powerful if they know what success looks like, closes the gap between the learner's current status and a more desirable level of achievement. Feedback is incredibly empowering as it enables students to move forwards, to plot, plan, adjust, rethink and exercise

self-regulation. Feedback works because the goals are known and accurately defined through realistic assessment. Most effective is showing a worked example of various levels of success and identifying the differences.

Feedback is powerful if students know

- What success looks like
- Appreciate that it aims at reducing the gap where they are and where they need to be
- When it is focused on providing them information about where to next

This then seems to be the best point to engage student's agency. By outlining clear success criteria in partnership with students as to "Why this is important to learn" students can then have a voice in seeing where their efforts lie and what is their next step. The challenge for teachers is to find a manageable way for this to happen within the classroom setting.

The importance of students being active participants in their learning relies on students knowing:
- WHAT they need to learn
- HOW to do the learning
- WHY they are learning the skill or strategy

Key checkpoints need to include
- Know what the next steps look like by creating rubrics based on exemplars or other appropriate models of work at the next level
- Explicit success criteria with modelling.
- Self -assessment against success criteria followed by teacher feedback evidenced where success criteria have been meet.
- Evidence of tracking and monitoring the learning.
- Reteaching of success criteria not independently and completely mastered.
- Celebrating the learning by publishing or sharing with an audience.
- Evidence that the student transfers the learning to other contexts

What does the research from the Centre for Education Research and Innovation tell us about how we use the use the learning sciences to inform the design of 21st Century learning environments?
The dominant concept underpinning learning now needs to be socio- constructivist being

- Constructive where self-regulated learning is fostered.
- Learning is sensitive to context.
- Learning will be collaborative.

The ultimate goal of teaching and learning needs to acquire adaptive expertise. i.e the ability to apply meaningfully-learned knowledge and skills flexibly and creatively in different situations.

The broad pedagogical approaches to enable this

- **Guided teaching** including goals for learning, measurable outcomes that include constant feedback.
- **Action Learning** in which the learners determine the objectives in collaboration with their teacher with a strong element of learner self - organization and self -planning
- **Experiential learning** where what is learned is determined by context and learner's motivations

There needs to be an integrated use of all three approaches that allows for structure and guidance and create space for substantial self -regulated and self -determined learning . Motivation ensures that students acquire knowledge and skills in a meaningful away .Positive motivation towards a learning tasks markedly increases the likelihood that students will engage in deep learning. Teachers should provide time, space and support for students to reflect on the learning strategies they have been used and extended their learning

The eight basics of motivation for student engagement are
- Perceive stable links between specific actions and achievement.
- Feel competent to do what is expected of them
- Value the subject and have a clear sense of purpose.
- Perceive the environment as favourable for learning
- Experience positive emotions towards learning activities
- Direct their attention when they experience negative emotion
- More persistent in learning when they can manage their resource and deal with obstacles efficiently
- Free up cognitive resources for learning when they are able to influence the intensity, duration and expression of their emotion.

Cognitive science teaches us that the quality of knowledge and understanding is of greatest importance rather than just how much knowledge is acquired.

There are seven principles of Learning.
1) **Learners at the centre**
- Activities must center on student's cognition and growth
- Learning activities allow student to construct their learning through engagement and active exploration
- Call for a mix of pedagogies including guided and action approaches as well as cooperative inquiry – based and service learning
- self-regulated leaners who develop meta cognitive skills, monitor, evaluate and optimize the acquisition and use of knowledge, regulate their emotions and motivation during the learning process, manage study time well and set higher specific and personal goals and are able to monitor them.

2) **The social nature of learning**

- Neuroscience confirms that we learn through social interaction so the organization of learning should be highly social
- Cooperative group work appropriately organized has clear benefits for achievement as well as behavioral and affective outcomes

- Personal research and self-study are also important and opportunities for autonomous   learning should grow as students grow and mature.

3) Emotions are integral to learning
- Learning results from the dynamic interplay of emotion, motivation and cognition
- Positive beliefs about oneself are a key component.
- Attention to motivations by all those involved makes the learning effective

4) Recognizing Individual differences
Student differ in many ways fundamental to learning, prior knowledge, ability, conceptions for learning, learning styles and strategies, motivation , self-efficacy, beliefs and emotions.
Prior knowledge is highly influential for how each individual learns.
Learning environments need the adaptability to reflect individual differences.

5) Stretching all students
Learning needs to be challenging enough for learners to reach above their existing level and capacity and not be allowed to coast.
High achieving students can help lower achieving students
Avoid overloading and demotivating based on fear, grind and excessive pressure.

6) Assessment for learning
Learning environments need to be clear about what is expected, what learners are doing and why,
Formative assessment should be substantial, regular and provide meaningful feedback.

7) Build horizontal Connections
Complex knowledge structures are built up by organizing basic pieces of knowledge in a hierarchial way.
Ability for leaners to see connectedness between the formal learning environment and the wider environment and society. Authentic learning fosters deeper understanding.

So what might this look like in classrooms – One model for incorporating student agency

At the start of the lesson
A pre-discussion on what you are learning today and why…
What do we already know shared with group.
This would be following modelling or analysis of the skills evident in a piece of work.
(This is displayed visually as well to keep in front of students)

During the lesson
Describe the success criteria and the strategies that they are using to demonstrate their learning
This is also displayed visually for students to refer back to.
Deliberate act of teaching - modelling, analyzing, viewing etc.
Student work on own piece either independent, if confident, or in conjunction with teachers for skills to be presented in a multitude of ways.
Following task completion individual conference (may be over a week to cover the class)
Show me in your reading or writing when you are using the skill / you are able to demonstrate your learning

After the lesson
How did you go with your learning?
 How do you know?
What are you able to do?
What did you find tricky / challenging?
Peer and self-assessment using highlighting, ticking etc can be used as tool for this
What are your next steps?

Mapping Student progress
Create a visual map of success criteria needed to be achieved (I CAN sheets)
These can be created from literacy progressions although as these are in two years intervals they needs a great deal of breaking down.
Learning pathways using a student chosen graphic of personal interest.
Teacher formative assessment of identified success criteria to be covered (as part of collaborative planning) identifying students achievement.
What acceleration strategy is needed for those without complete mastery?
What are the next steps for those with complete mastery?

Celebrating success.
Publishing for peer review
Sharing with parents and community.
Student led conferences

Student Agency in creating a Positive School Learning culture
Not only do students need to develop student agency about their personal learning but also be agents for fostering a stimulating, caring learning culture within their school.
 Sir Ken Robinson defines education as
"to enable students to understand the word around them and the talents within them so that they can become fulfilled individuals and active, compassionate citizens"

This understanding has four major priorities
1) Education should enable student to become economically responsible and independent.

2) Education should enable students to understand and appreciate their own cultures and to respect the diversity of others.

3) Education should enable young people to become active and compassionate citizens

4) Education should enable young people to engage with the world within then as well as the world around them.

One model for integrating these ideas of increasing student's agency and engagement in learning is presented by the "Super School project" whose philosophy is that students have the most to gain from their own learning experiences so therefore they deserve an active voice in the way their schools should work. A student who is motivated in the classroom is more likey to be engaged in their community and positive community experiences improve engagement in school. Data shows that student engagement in communities correlates with higher academic performance.

The model offers a range of very useful tools to survey students about their learning experiences and ways to use this is planning school programmes, teacher practice and even buildings. Authentic engagement occurs only when students are treated as valued contributor to the decision-making process.

Next Steps

From all my research, reflections, professional discussions and school visits there is very clear evidence that Student Agency is a vital competent of learning for 21st century learner to ensure they know what they are learning, why are learning and what they have learnt so they are informed connected learners in a process that is undertaken "with them and not to them'. The changing face of education and the new technologies available offer a lot of exciting and innovative ways to ensure student have agency not only on their learning but also in the culture of the school in which that learn.

The key element for success of this lies in a common pedagogy and understanding of this by all staff as a common consistent pedagogy is practised in our school.

Our next steps will begin with professional development and a school wide inquiry around this pedagogy prior to us reviewing our school curriculum and strategic planning in 2018.

This inquiry will have students agency as a vital component so we can see all we do through the eyes of our students.

This inquiry will then dictate our next steps.

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Refences

Sir Ken Robinson – "A Daring Revolutionist". NEW Zealand Principal June 2017

Dr Julia Atkin – "From values & beliefs about learning to principles and practice"

John Hattie - "Visible Learning and the Science of How we learn" 2014

Centre for Educational Research and Innovation - "The Nature of Learning"

The Super School Project.

Derek Wenmoth, CORE Education 10 Trends

ERO Review Indicators

New Zealand Curriculum.

Schools visited.

Waiho Downs, Waimate.

Patea Area School, Taranaki

Opunake Primary School, Taranaki.

Rangiora Borough School, Christchurch.