

Principals Sabbatical Report

**Review research on learner agency
and discuss/observe learner agency
in action with students and
teachers.**

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Why learner agency?

In the past, the education system was organised predominantly as a response to a largely industrial world and the economic need for literate and numerate factory workers. Class organisations were determined by students' ages, advancement from one class to the next was dependent on age and/or achievement, and all children received a standardised curriculum based on their class level (21st Century Learning Reference Group, 2014). Learner agency was not a consideration at all. Rather, all decisions about the students' learning were made by well-intentioned adults with no consultation or collaboration with the learners themselves. The how, what, when, where and why of the learning process was positioned in the hands of adults, mainly teachers. These teachers worked within a regime of accountability and therefore were held accountable and responsible for the learning of students (Penrice, 2012). As a result, the teachers controlled and managed the learning for the learners.

The change from an essentially industrial to a technological world has placed different demands on our young learners, and as a consequence, our teachers. The rapid and ever-increasing pace of change, the increasing complexity of the world with the resulting opportunities and problems, and the unpredictability of what skills and knowledge our learners will require for their future all contribute to reevaluating the effectiveness of the current education system, especially the roles of the students and the teachers. The traditional transmissive pedagogical approach of schools of a one size fits all approach, whereby the teacher delivered the programme and the students were passive recipients, no longer is meeting the needs of learners in an everchanging modern world. The emphasis is no longer on teacher-directed pedagogy where the teacher controls the choice of concepts, context and delivery of the programme. Rather, there is a shift in power where the student has a voice to indicate what, when, where and how they learn. As opposed to being transmitters of information, teachers need to increasingly take on the role of facilitator, fostering, coaching and developing learners' capacity to initiate, manage and maintain their own learning. Lifelong learning is a prerequisite skill for 21st century living, and the current education system needs to provide learners with the necessary skills and tools. "Having agency as a learner is now becoming a default expectation" to meet 21st century learning needs (21st Century Learning Reference Group 2014, p.36).

What is learner agency?

There are many definitions of learner agency in the research literature, but the overriding commonality is that learner agency requires learners to be active as opposed to passive participants in their learning process. Bek Galloway at her Increasing Learner Agency Workshop defined learner agency as "the learners taking ownership, making decisions, driving their journey to the degree that works best for them" (May 10, 2018). Learner agency emphasises the learners' "power or capacity to act and make choices" (Derek Wenmoth, CORE Education 10 Trends). Traditionally, learning experiences often involved the transmission of skills and knowledge via the teacher to the learner who is organised into either groups or classes of children. This had the potential for learners to feel disenfranchised as learners did not feel in control of the what, the when and the where of their learning.

Derek Wenmoth highlights three criteria regarding learner agency.

- Agency involves learners believing that the way they approach learning can make a difference for them. He calls this a personal sense of agency.
- Agency is about connectedness and collaboration - not about working alone on projects that the learner is passionate about.
- Agency is about the learner being aware of the impact and consequences of their actions on others

The Key Competencies are an essential part of *The New Zealand Curriculum* (Ministry of Education, 2007) and incorporate “the capabilities that young people need for growing, working, and participating in their communities” (Ministry of Education, 2007, p. 38). Students who are agentic learners use and develop their skills and abilities in the Key Competencies in a variety of increasingly complex and unfamiliar contexts.

Effects of Learner Agency

Research evidence confirms a high correlation between the aspects of student voice, control, challenge and collaborative practice that are inherent in learner agency and increased motivation and engagement (Toshalis & Nakkula, 2012) as well as increased academic performance and enjoyment of the learning experience (Luo, Yang, Vue & Zuo, 2018). When students have the opportunity to take ownership of their learning, they can drive their learning by linking their learning experiences to their personal interests and passions. As a result, they are more engaged and committed to their learning experience. Agency leads to the development of self-management skills as the learners have choice and decisions about their learning and self-monitor through reflection. Agency also empowers the learner as they are enabled to make authentic contributions to their school and community.

Findings

This study presents the findings from discussions with teachers as well as observations of and discussions with the students within a typology of learner agency developed by Jennifer Charteris and Dianne Smardon, (2017). This typology indicates four different ways of thinking about agency – sovereign agency, relational agency, ecological agency and new material agency.

Sovereign Agency

Sovereign agency focuses on the individual as they engage in autonomous self-determined learning. Associated with cognitivism, mindsets, and self-determination theories, this form of agency minimises the importance of social interaction, and regards the agentic person as one who is an independent, reflexive individual (Burkitt, 2015). Sovereign agency is characterised by ‘choice and voice’, and focuses on learner responsibility and empowerment.

Charteris and Smardon (2017) found sovereign agency was the dominant interpretation of agency among the 38 New Zealand school principals and teachers who participated in their study. I also found that this form of learner agency was the approach that was mostly used in the schools where I observed.

One school had a teacher directed task followed by list of activities students could choose from once they had completed the teacher task. This is very similar to the task boards approach often used in the past for Mathematics and Literacy, where there would be a teacher follow-up task after the instructional group work, and then students could choose from a range of activities such as computer activities, reading in the classroom library etc. The main difference is that there was no controlling ten to fifteen minute time slot for each activity. I observed evidence of the Must do, Can do approach especially for younger learners. Generally, the Must do tasks are teacher chosen tasks, although some schools did take into account student voice in the choice of the activities on the list. This could be viewed as an extension of the fast finishers approach but often students have a say in the activities within the Can do list. When talking with the students, their focus seemed to be on the immediate tasks at hand, rather than bigger picture of the process of their learning. One girl was very concerned that she would not finish her Must do tasks within the required time slot, but generally most students enjoyed having the choice once they had completed the Must do activity, so were more engaged and motivated in their learning.

The use of flexible timetabling in one school entailed the students having a timeslot, generally most of the morning period, to work on their mathematics and literacy tasks. The order that they did these tasks was up to the individual student, as long as they engaged in mathematics and literacy tasks within this time period. The students had learning pathways for mathematics, so could easily see what they had achieved, what they were working on, and what their next steps were.

Another school implemented a developmental approach according to the age of the children. At each stage the children were given the skills and opportunities to take a lead their learning by having a voice in what, where and how they learn.

Sovereign agency gives minimal consideration given to socio-cultural factors and power relations in the learning environment (Charteris & Smardon 2017).

Relational Agency.

In relational agency the focus is less on individual autonomy and more on social collaboration. Coming from a socio-cultural perspective, relational agency is socially produced as the participants are interdependent on each other, and their skills and abilities are used in joint actions within a culture that values sensitive, emotional relatedness between others and the situation of the interaction (Burkitt, 2015). This involves the ability for students to work with their peers and/or others to “strengthen purposeful responses to complex problems” (Edwards, 2011, p.34). To be successful in this type of purposeful collaboration, students need to be able to work in with others, recognizing their capabilities and understandings which aligns closely with the New Zealand Curriculum Key Competencies of Relating to Others, and Participating and Contributing. Others’ responses are aligned and incorporated with the students’ contributions thereby resulting in

distributed and relational expertise (Edwards, 2011). Relational agency ensures the students are central to the learning process, as learning information flows between the students, and teachers and parents, who are the interested, involved key partners in their learning journey.

One school had developed learning pathways for mathematics and literacy to develop the flow of information between students and teachers. The reasoning behind this was if students were to have agency, they needed to have an understanding of the learning progressions and where their learning was in relation to these progressions. The student learning pathways were in ‘child-speak,’ and were used by the students to indicate what they have mastered, what they were in the process of learning, and their next steps. These pathways were central to the collaborative discussions held between the teachers and student, as they discussed assessment results and learning progress. This resulted in the students seeing where they had been, where they are now and where they are going next. I can easily see this approach being an asset in student-led conferences which is the approach taken by the next school.

In another school, students were involved in three-way conversations between the student, parent and teacher. They were in the process of developing the students’ abilities in these student-led conferences with the ultimate goal of the student taking full responsibility in leading the whole meeting.

In both examples, the collaborative approach between students and adults in relation to the students’ learning strengthened the purposeful responses. The regular feedback between students and teachers/parents meant that everyone shared responsibility and accountability, and the students were supported in achieving their next steps.

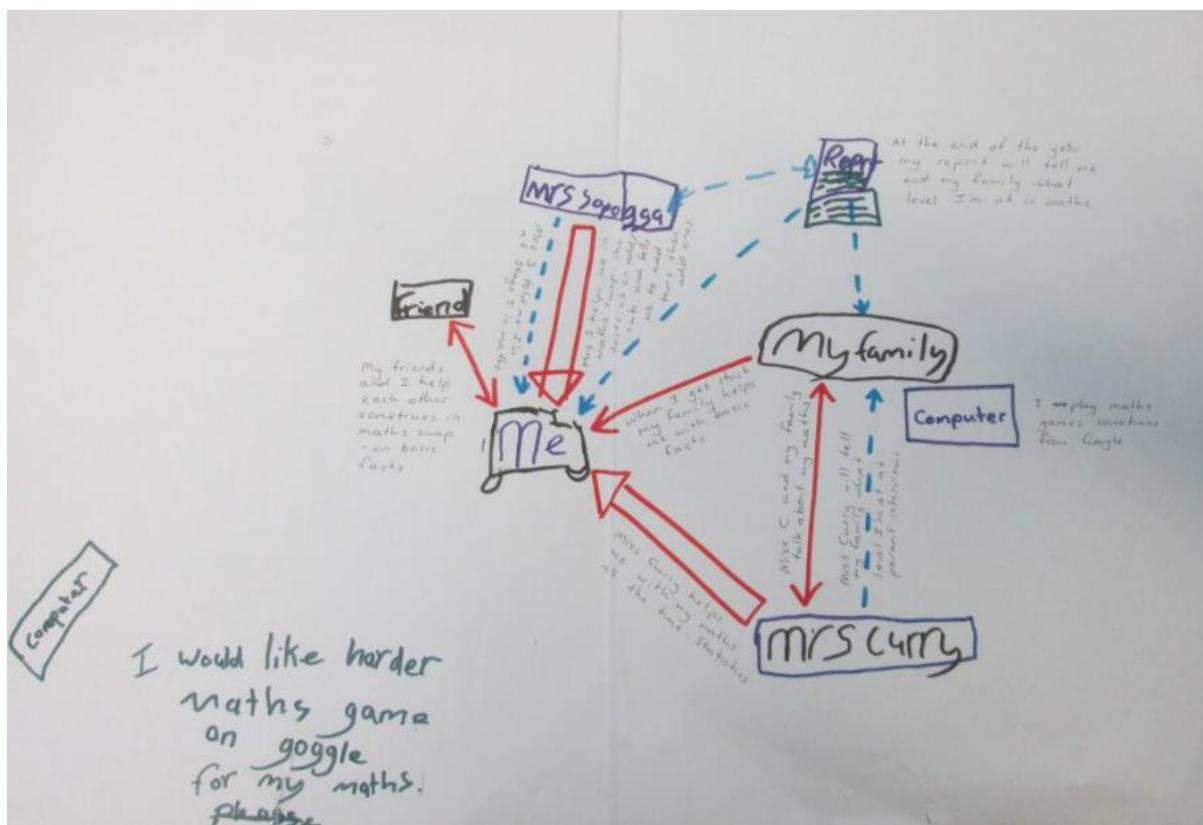
Ecological agency

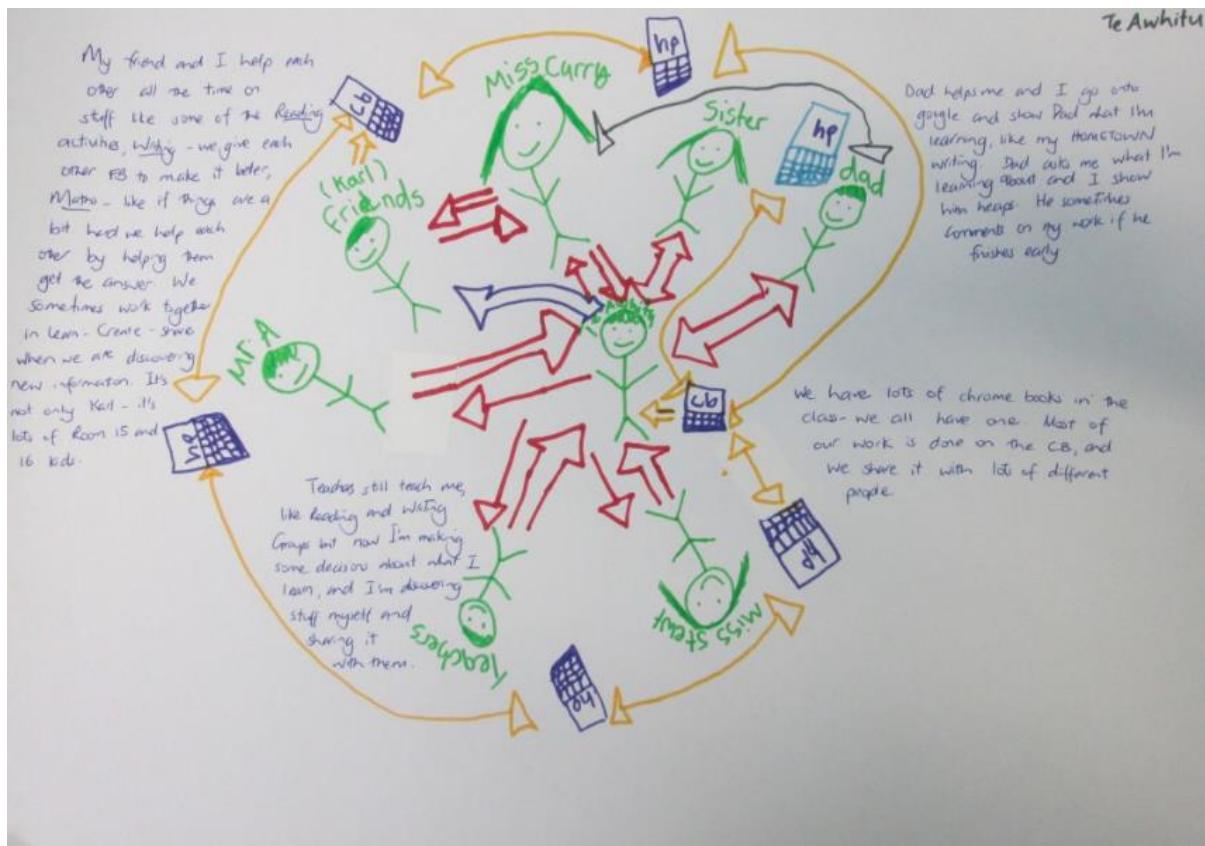
Ecological agency is associated with socio-cultural theories and is more holistic in its approach than sovereign and relational agencies. It takes into account that “individual agency is shaped through experiences in the family or the school context as well as the general socio-cultural conditions encountered” (Schoon, 2018, p.8). Therefore, ecological agency is a relational process that develops through the interaction of the individual’s willingness and ability to act, as well as the socio-cultural structures shaping their behaviour. Schoon (2018) elaborates on this, “for example, the value that an individual associates with a particular goal are strongly influenced by the social group the individual holds high in regard, such as parents, friends, teachers or peers, which in turn reflect current cultural norms and beliefs regarding appropriate behaviour and action”(p.8). Therefore, ecological agency can be viewed as a relational process that occurs through the interactions of both people and the social context.

Furthermore, ecological agency is a temporally embedded, in other words, a time related, process of social engagement (Charteris & Smardon, 2017). This means it takes into account the temporal dimensions, building on students’ past experiences, achievements and understandings, making connections with the present to use as a potential capacity for future action (Schoon, 2018). Those students who have a comprehensive range of

experience, knowledge and skills have the potential to achieve agency more quickly than others.

I did not observe examples of this type of agency during my sabbatical, but did engage in discussions with several teachers about Brain Annan's and Mary Whootten's (2015) Infinity Learner Maps. These Learning Maps are "a vehicle to grow student agency by connecting students, teaching professionals, families and whānau with one another and to global trends in learning" (Annan & Wootten, 2015). Students develop their skills in evaluating their current learning and taking responsibility to "make changes to their strategizing around academic learning" (Annan & Wootten, 2015) to ensure successful future learning with the support of their teachers, family and whanau.





New Material Agency

Whilst sovereign, relational, and ecological agencies centre on the human experience, new material agency is focused on the objects and structures in the learning environment (Jackson & Mazzei, 2016). These objects and structures have the ability to affect the interactions between people and the non-human aspects of the learning environment as well as the learning relationships between humans (Charteris & Smardon, 2017). Jane Bennett refers to this as, “thing-power gestures toward the strange ability of ordinary, man-made items to exceed their status as objects and to manifest traces of independence or aliveness, constituting the outside of our own experience’ (2010, p. xvi). To illustrate, students who prefer to work alone may find a learning environment dominated by group tables as somewhat constraining. Furthermore, classrooms predominantly set up with individual desks may limit effective collaborative practices unless proactive measures are taken to reorganise the furniture to ensure easier access to the desire pedagogical organisational structure. Agency is generally thought of as human decision-making action but new material agency demonstrates that objects and structures have the power to influence what learning is possible within different parts in the learning environment. Therefore, new generation learning environments can have the potential to promote or hinder learner agency.

New material agency involves student-initiated use of space, furniture, and digital devices. In one small rural school the two classrooms had been remodeled into a flexible learning environment. The group tables were multi-purpose in the respect that they could be used on their own with one to three children comfortably working at them, or they can be interlocked either in a linear or a circular configuration to suit the students’ needs. All

students had access to a variety of portable one to one digital devices. Space, furniture, and digital devices can be viewed as pedagogical objects that can influence the students' decisions as to how they physically learn (Charteris & Smardon, 2017).

In this school, students had the choice of placing tables together to enable collaborative group work, or to separate the tables so they can work independently, or with one or two other students. When students were working on independent tasks, they could choose whether they worked with a group or on their own. Students had the choice of working within the classroom, or outside the classroom in the playground. There was also choice around seating arrangements. Students could choose from working independently or with peers on bean bags, on floor cushions, standing at a high table, working on the floor, kneeling at low tables, couches, or seated at tables. The use of portable one-to one digital devices combined with the flexibility of space and furniture "constituted agentic relational flows with opportunities for students' decision-making about how they learn" (Charteris & Smardon, 2017, p.11)

The culture engendered a more group feel, as the only places that belonged to individuals were their tote trays for their personal belongings. Everything else was shared and there was a feel of our room, our space, and our furniture. This inclusiveness engendered a positive culture for collaborative group work.

In essence, the students could choose how they organized their own learning to physically suit their learning style and the task at hand, as long as they met the teacher's expectation which was that they all had to be on task. This illustrates how the objects and structures, in this case, flexible furniture, space, and digital devices, influenced how the learning took place within the learning environment.

Teacher practices to foster student agency

Learner agency involves a dramatic restructuring of teacher and student roles to enable transformative learning (Robertson, 2017). This needs to be a consideration when implementing agency within the school programme. It was noticeable in my discussions with schools, that most of the larger schools had a core of teachers who were keen to be involved in implementing learner agency as opposed to whole school implementation. Significant changes in teaching practice involve much commitment, time, effort, and development of knowledge on behalf of the teachers, and these schools were aware of these demands, and supported the teachers accordingly. Charteris and Smardon (2017, p.4) emphasise that "a crucial enabler for learner agency centres on teachers' skills and knowledge of practices that enable distributed power in classroom relationships." Agency involves learner choice and voice, and in this respect the teachers, as learners, should have these opportunities to drive their pedagogical learning.

Jean Annan (2016) has brought together the following teaching practices to foster student agency. This list is not to be considered as a checklist for teachers to work their way through. Rather, it is a reference guide to the features teachers can select to deepen their knowledge after examining the particular conditions of their own teaching/learning environment. Refer to the original article for the relevant research writings on each practice (Annan, 2016).

1. Negotiating Learning

- Generating options so that students have real and supported choice
- Recognising the uniqueness of children and individualized learning
- Understanding what each child wants and needs to learn
- Taking into account children's own aspirations, beliefs and competencies
- Distinguishing between agency in active learning and self-directed learning
- Reframing students' expressions of resistance or questioning as constructive, agentic events

2. Linking learning to real life

- Linking learning with valued practices
- Reflecting home/community culture in the classroom
- Placing emphasis on real problems
- Understanding the broader contexts of students' lives

3. Creating and supporting learning connections

- Providing opportunities for learning inside and outside of the classroom
- Facilitating chance encounters for learning through increased connections
- Creating opportunities for discursive dialogue or meandering conversation
- Making technology, artefacts and tools accessible to increase connections

4. Nurturing positive and optimistic attitudes

- Nurturing students' sense of optimism, hope and trust
- Helping students and those who support their learning to view events through appreciative eyes

5. Supporting reflection on learning

- Teaching and encouraging the use of self reflection skills
- Providing opportunities for self-reflection

6. Creating emotionally secure climates for learning

- Demonstrating genuine caring about students' learning
- Fostering a sense of purpose and passion for learning
- Consistency to allow students to feel secure, respectful and ready to learn
- Encouraging students to welcome new challenges and appreciate learning opportunities in the face of less-than-favourable outcomes

7. Fostering teacher agency

- Ensuring teacher agency. When teachers have choice in shaping systems of education they feel valued and are better positioned to commit effort to supporting students' agency
- Understanding the parameters within which student agency can be supported
- Examining contradictions between agency and guidance/control

Jean Annan's article *Student agency in interactive learning environments* contains two appendices. The first is Student Sense of Agency Interview Schedule and the second is

Student Agency: Discussion Points for Teachers. These are intended as discussion documents to shape the learning environment and inform teaching practices, as opposed to definitive measures of individuals' learner agency.

Implications for Taieri Beach School

From my readings, reflections, professional discussions, and school visits during this sabbatical, it is very evident that learner agency is an essential component of the 21st education system. However, embedding learner agency into school systems and the curriculum entails more than a 'choice, voice approach', in other words, presenting learners with a list of choices and inviting student voice. Instead, it is about providing the conditions and skills to successfully empower learners with agency (Derek Wenmoth: Ten Trends 14 May 2018). "Teachers do not create learning, *learners create learning*, teachers create the conditions in which students learn" (Wiliam, 2006, p.4). The ownership of teaching and learning has to shift from the teacher to the learner, with learner engagement progressing from non-participation to empowerment. "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." (Johnston, 2004, p.29).

This entails the development of teachers' knowledge and skills in pedagogical practices that enable distributed power in the student-teacher relationship, moving from the delivery of the curriculum to enabling the learner to co-construct the learning experience thereby transforming the learning process. It is imperative that family and whānau are part of the process as well to ensure strong, positive, supportive links between home and school. To ensure a common understanding and development of learner agency throughout Taieri Beach School, we will engage in professional development and a school-wide inquiry related to learner agency in 2019, using this sabbatical report as a starting point. This will link in with the digital technology focus we will be involved in through our PLD contract.

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Nui rawa te whakawhetai ki a koe.

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