TEACHER AGENCY
and its role in raising achievement

What is it and can it be coached?

'A journey of a thousand miles must begin with a single step.' (Lao Tzu)

Barry Schon
Principal
Johnsonville School
Wellington
Term 2 2018

Contents

Acknowledgements

My appreciation goes to:
- The Johnsonville School Board of Trustees, for supporting my sabbatical application
- The Johnsonville School staff, for their interest and encouragement
- Mark Sweeney, from the Impact Education Group, for sparking my interest in coaching – I highly recommend him
- The four teachers from local Wellington Schools, whom I surveyed to gain a teacher perspective – for taking some of their valuable time to share their beliefs and experiences
- Our Johnsonville School Deputy Principal, Basil Ziogos, for embracing the opportunity to step into the role of Acting Principal.

My main sources were:
- 'Teacher Agency - An Ecological Approach' by Mark Priestly, Gert Biesta and Sarah Robinson (Bloomsbury 2015)
- 'Coaching Leadership' by Jan Robertson (NZCER Press 2016)
- Conversations about coaching and teacher agency, with Mark Sweeney from the Impact Education Group
- Reflections about my own experiences after 15 years as a classroom teacher and 13 years as a principal
- A survey of teachers from four different local schools.

Purpose and Background

My project intends to answer the following questions:
1) What is teacher agency?
2) What might agency look like in practice?
3) Is teacher agency a prerequisite in raising the achievement of at-risk learners?
4) Can it be coached?
5) If so, what are some practical coaching models and suggestions?

PART ONE - TEACHER AGENCY

What is teacher agency?

Teacher agency is often defined as 'teachers demonstrating a capacity to act to solve pedagogical problems and/or challenges'. Some see it as an innate quality that individuals are born with, while others consider it to be something of an emergent phenomenon, a stage that can be achieved through the interplay of teacher capacity and school conditions.

Mark Priestley, Gert Biesta and Sarah Robinson in their publication 'Teacher Agency – An Ecological Approach' favour the latter. They identify three dimensions:

- ➢ Influences from the past (agency is rooted in past experiences)
- ➢ Orientations towards the future (agency implies an ability to envisage multiple future possibilities)
- ➢ Engagement with the here and now (agency means taking action)

Bandura (2002) strongly links agency to self-efficacy – the belief that one can make a difference.

Biesta (2014), says agency is not something teachers *have*, but something that they *do* - agency is teachers actively contributing to the shaping of their work and its conditions. But I would add, that while it implies a degree of autonomy, it does not mean that the teacher has 'sole input' over their work – as the interests of all stakeholders (incl. students, parents, government) should drive the education of students in a teacher's care.

My definition of teacher agency

My project has led me to the understanding that teacher agency is a teacher's ability to actively shape their work in order to successfully progress the challenges they encounter. Agency is grown through a complex interplay of a teacher's qualities as an individual and the school conditions in which he/she operates. Agency is essential when addressing pedagogical challenges.

The following are examples of teacher qualities and school conditions that lay the foundations of teacher agency. They are further explored in the teacher survey on pages 9-11:

(Some of) the qualities teachers need to achieve agency
- ✓ Self-efficacy
- ✓ Confidence in self
- ✓ Self-awareness and insight
- ✓ Openness to new ideas
- ✓ Professional competence - knowledge and skills
- ✓ Pragmatism
- ✓ Optimism
- ✓ A desire to be an agent of change
- ✓ An ability to identify what's important then critically shape responses to problematic situations
- ✓ Moral purpose
- ✓ A belief that all children can succeed (in a broad sense)
- ✓ An ability to forge and maintain positive relationships, often under challenging conditions

School conditions to grow teacher agency
- ✓ Structures that allow teachers a degree of autonomy and give permission for teachers to take pedagogical risks
- ✓ A culture of psychological safety, enabling teachers to find meaning in their work
- ✓ School leadership that expects teachers to exert judgment and control over their own work
- ✓ Opportunities that tap into teachers' motivation
- ✓ Resources that enable action to be initiated and sustained
- ✓ A staff culture that encourages teacher voice within a collective vision
- ✓ Relevant and meaningful professional development
- ✓ Relationships marked by trust, respect and authentic connection (Hadid 2017)

Is teacher agency needed to accelerate the achievement (in a broad sense) of at risk and/or priority learners?
John Hattie's research has shown that, by merely focusing on a learning need, a teacher is likely to raise the achievement of students to some degree. However, I would argue that at risk learners will not achieve acceleration (i.e. make progress significantly greater than that expected over a school year) if they are not working alongside a teacher who shows a marked degree of teacher agency. Such students need teachers who believe (and are able to) make a significant difference and the schoolwide conditions in which to accelerate learning (see above).
This applies equally to learning to write, learning to swim, or learning how to interact positively with other students.

Recent NZ Educational Reforms and their relationship to teacher agency (my perspective)

Recent New Zealand educational reforms focused on change at a system level – with examples being a narrow nationwide focus on numeracy and literacy data; an obsession with so called 'priority learners'; National Standards league tables; COLS (Communities of Schools) driven by numeracy and literacy scores. These top down reforms appear to have had little positive effect on the achievement of the very students they were intended to assist. I would argue that they also led to lower morale across the primary school sector, meaning less job satisfaction for teachers and principals. This in turn created school conditions that discouraged agency in teachers.

Recent system level government reforms told teachers:
"You will help us achieve what we think is important."

A refreshed approach, which would grow teacher agency (and match the principles of coaching) would rejig this message:
"We will help you achieve what you think is important."

I believe a focus on growing teacher agency is a more intelligent approach and more likely to raise achievement (in a broad sense) for at risk learners. To quote Priestly, Biesta, Robinson:

'Teacher agency approaches the question of good education from the bottom up, seeking to enhance the intelligence of the overall operation of the system at all levels….to put teacher agency at the heart of what it means to make education good, does of course put a significant responsibility on teachers, both individually and collectively….it requires more from teachers, rather than less, just as it requires more from those who have responsibility for shaping the conditions of teachers' agency.'

PART TWO - COACHING

What is coaching?

Unlike instructing, advising and teaching, coaching is non-directive. Coaching is helping others to help themselves. Coaching assumes 'that the answers lie within'. It activates agency.

Jan Robertson, in her publication 'Coaching Leadership' states the following:

1. The process is dynamic, meeting the changing needs of and resulting in new learning for each person. In this way, it's also a reciprocal learning partnership.
2. The coach is the facilitator of the learning process.
3. Instead of being positioned as the expert, the coach is a learner in the process. Coaches take their expertise into the relationship and acknowledge their partner's expertise as they together construct shared knowledge.
4. The coached person takes responsibility for his/her own professional learning and sets the agenda and goals for the coaching sessions.
5. The partners have a good understanding of each other's role and the social, cultural and political context in which they both work.
6. The coaching relationship takes time to develop effectively and sustain, with educational change, innovation and improvement occurring over time.
7. The coaching partners require the interpersonal, communication and coaching skills to work in different ways.

Mark Sweeney says (paraphrased):

Coaching is more than just a fireside chat. It's more specific than mentoring. It's not teaching, instructing or collaborating to solve a problem. The coached teacher drives the process and is responsible for its success – with their head, heart and hands.
It means working together to formulate and monitor a game plan, with the coached teacher using a growth mindset while working towards strong S.M.A.R.T. goals.

Some coaching session tips (Mark Sweeney):
Before the first coaching session, give the person being coached the following questions to share at the session:

PURPOSE - In one sentence, explicitly share your purpose as an educator.

BELIEFS - What are 4 of your key beliefs, as an educator?

STRENGTHS - What are you good at and what energises you?

DIFFERENCE - What are 3 areas you've chosen to focus on, because you want to make a difference?

THREE COACHING MODELS

These models have many common aspects.

GROW coaching model:

GOAL   – Where do you want to go?
REALITY   – Where are you now?
OPTIONS   – What can you do?
WHAT NEXT   – What will you do?

ARA Pathway coaching model:

AIM   – What do you want to achieve?
REALITY   – What is the current situation?
ACTION   – What is your first goal?

CIGAR coaching model:

CURRENT REALITY   – What is your situation?
IDEAL   – What would your best outcome look like?
GAPS   – How does your current reality differ to your ideal situation?
ACTION   – What is your goal?
REVIEW   – (later) How are you progressing?

And more tips from Mark Sweeney…
- ✓ Use indicators to ask 'what's working?' – score out of ten (scaling)
- ✓ Throw in positives
- ✓ What do you want? (focus on moving towards a positive action rather than 'worshipping the problem')
- ✓ Refine big picture down to specific actions – "What are your indicators for 'making a difference'?"
- ✓ Cumulative repetition of where you (we) are getting to
- ✓ A goal without a timeline is just an idea
- ✓ Paraphrasing and summarising are a key
- ✓ Create a bubble of communication
- ✓ Be aware of body language (Minimal encouragers – nodding, repeating)
- ✓ 45-degree seating – not face to face – corner of a table – make notes on side opposite to person
- ✓ 'Think time' for trickier questions – back off to avoid pressure – don't feel the need to fill the space
- ✓ If not getting anywhere – "If there were no barriers at all, what would you do?" "What have you seen other people do in this situation?" "Maybe we should park this, to give you time to think – then meet again tomorrow."

- ✓ Still not working? Agree to move out of coaching mode and offer some framed suggestions – "You evaluate and you may choose one – once you have we can leap back into the coaching solution steps."
- ✓ Still not working? Offer a solution "I think you should do this."
- ✓ Small amount of steps/goals/actions only – take time

Is coaching the only solution?

Coaching can be very effective, but it's not the only way to meet and solve challenges. Whether coaching should be used depends on the contextual factors. For example, a teacher may just want to be told what to do, or the challenge may be of the highest urgency. If the challenge would be better solved using a different approach (e.g. if it's an urgent situation), then other approaches should be used.

Examples:
Telling – you need to try this
Teaching – this is how you do it
Collaborative problem solving – let's work together on this one
(These may then progress to coaching)

PART THREE - TEACHER SURVEY

This survey was carried out during May 2018. Four teachers, from local schools, were surveyed. These teachers were identified by their principals as demonstrating qualities that suited them to meeting learning and/or behavioural challenges in students.

The purpose of the survey was to look beyond the literature and my own perspectives, to identify examples of aspects of teacher agency within classroom practice.

Teachers were asked to think of a child with learning or behavioural needs who, due to their (the teacher's) efforts, made significant (and possibly unexpected) progress. It was acknowledged that at times, working with this child would have been tough, but on reflection, the teacher felt a sense of professional pride and achievement due to their actions.

The survey questions:

1) What actions did you take, that worked?
2) What actions did you take, that didn't work (if any)?
3) What personal qualities do you have that enabled you to work successfully with this child? (e.g. I am a good listener)
4) What beliefs do you have, that help you engage with learning and/or behavioural challenges?   (e.g. I believe that you should never write anyone off)
5) What are some aspects of your school's culture/people/resourcing that helped you in your journey with this child?

TEACHER AGENTIC QUALITIES/BELIEFS that underpin agency

The following are (just a few) examples of agentic qualities/beliefs, articulated by the teachers:

A belief that all children can succeed:
'I realised that success looks different for everyone'
'I was actually expecting co-operation and appealing to his logical side'
'I encouraged (other) teachers and children to separate the behaviour from the child'
'We got him involved in extra curricula activities such as choir, band and miniball…..to help him find a passion with something'
'I care about the student as a whole person'
'I believe that you have to look for the strengths in individuals'

Optimism:
'Be optimistic that tomorrow will be better'
'If there are behavioural challenges, then these get dealt with, then move on'

'I believe that you have to be able to leave things at school and realise you have done the best you can do in a situation'
'I believe every day starts afresh'
'I have a strong belief that each block is a new block'

Self-awareness and insight:
'I believe that my behaviour has an impact on the behaviour of others.'
'Keeping myself calm is important.'
'I am friendly, approachable, calm and open.'
'I also model being a flawed human being and don't hide my mistakes.'
'At first I tiptoed around behaviour – that was because I was scared of the response. I needed to get over that. That was about me!'
'I know that spectrum behaviour is not bad parenting.'
'I know when to ask for help.'
'Admitting that we don't have all of the answers.'

Openness to new ideas:
'You need to adapt for each child, which often involves a lot of new learning.'
'I found tools and strategies to make learning tasks more successful and therefore reduce overload.'
'I learnt about the condition he had and I learnt how to reduce the anxiety.'
'I was easily able to get new strategies from other teachers when I was stuck or when I felt I was going around in a circle..'
'(At first, I was) not allowing enough quiet cool down time – I needed to learn when to follow up with The Talk about behaviour, consequences etc.'

An ability to forge and maintain positive relationships:
'Having the positive relationships allows you to have a shared understanding of goals.'
'I believe it is important to celebrate and share success, no matter how big or small that success is.'
'Finding out about their interests – removing pressures and barriers'
'I liked him and he could tell.'
'I can work as part of a team, which in this case included family.'
'I am a good listener – to the child, parents, management, support agencies.'
'I believe in having high expectations, making connections, working in partnership with whanau.'
'I took time in the mornings to engage with him to ensure he felt heard.'
'Listened to all his jokes, stories or anything he wanted to tell me.'

An ability to identify what's important then critically shape responses to problematic situations:
'I believe you have to look underneath the patterns of behaviour to the why.'
'Reading him and adjusting expectations meant we kept away from conflict.'
'Not at first, but after a while, I didn't tiptoe around behaviour, but set clear boundaries, despite a significant chance this would result in a blow up.'
'Everything did involve a little bit of trial and error.'
'Never backing him into a corner or creating a scenario where he had to comply or lose face.'
'(Due to our efforts) he made drastic progress in ability to work independently, stay on task, and understanding of what was happening, which led to him making progress in his learning.'

Pragmatism
'Explaining the 'why' behind testing and how it would benefit him.'
'Thinking on your feet and being spontaneous was the key.'
'I addressed sensory needs with a variety of tools..'
'I am flexible and could cope when I needed to adapt quickly'
'It was a bit of a dance – I would adjust my expectations and he would not directly say no to me – that way we kept the relationship strong.'
'In the first week I realised that my strategies were too broad so I had to break down the strategies more.'
'Showed an interest in his interests (and let him be the teacher for me on these topics) and tried to tie this into his learning where possible.'

SCHOOL CONDITIONS that support agency

These are some school conditions, identified by teachers, that helped them work successfully with students:

Structures and Culture
'We built a culture so that children are supportive and understand diversity.'
'Our school culture firmly places students at the centre.'
'A warm, welcoming environment.'
'The handover between previous teacher and myself was done with lots of time and thought.'
'I'm not in this alone, there was a team at school.'
'I worked with the Behaviour Team.'
'You have to be able to laugh and share – you can't carry one child who is challenging on your own and you have to be able to find a lightness in it all or you can get consumed!'

Leadership
'Support with following up ideas and hunches.'
'The fact that my principal entrusted him with me in the first place, thinking we would be a good fit.'
'A small, supportive team, with strong leadership.'

Resources
'TAs that go above and beyond.'
'RTLBs helped with getting parents on board.'
'I had release for meetings etc.'
'Being given a separate space for him to work on the edges of things reduced his anxiety while still letting him learn by osmosis on the periphery when not actively involved.'

Relationships
'Working with a strong team.'
'Opportunities to meet and interact with parents often.'
'The TA he worked with knew him like the back of her hand and was hugely helpful and supportive.'
'A great relationship with RTLB and Behaviour Support.'

PART FOUR – MY CONCLUSIONS

1. For my definition of teacher agency – see page 3.

2. Teacher agency is achieved through an alignment of an individual teacher's personal qualities and the school conditions in which they work.

3. Aspects of teacher agency, such self-efficacy and pragmatism, can be coached. I see other dispositions, such as moral purpose and openness to new ideas, as prerequisites to coaching, rather than aspects that can be coached.

4. Teacher agency is not solely in the hands of individual teachers – the school conditions in which they work, play a pivotal part in a teacher's ability to achieve agency.

5. Effective coaching takes time and has a focus of long term gain. It may or may not be the most suitable initial approach for assisting a teacher to develop agency, depending on the starting point and the teacher's personal qualities.

6. Accelerating student achievement doesn't happen by chance. Teachers must demonstrate agency if they are to address pedagogical challenges.

7. In my experience, most teachers naturally demonstrate agentic behaviours within the parts of the curriculum about which they are 'passionate' and therefore highly engaged, if supported by school conditions. Examples I have encountered are the innovative integration of digital technology and the acceleration of achievement in writing through the A.L.L. (Accelerating Literacy Learning) Project.

8. Our challenge is for teachers, leadership and boards of trustees to work together to deverlop teacher agency across all aspects of school life.

References

Priestly, Bertista, Robinson: *Teacher Agency – An Ecological Approach* Bloomsberry Publications (2015)

Jan Robertson: *Coaching Leadership 2nd edition* NZCER Press (2016)

Conversations with Mark Sweeney, Impact Education Group (http://impacteducation.nz/)