

East Tamaki School



**Student Agency
2019**

Sabbatical Report

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Introduction

Student agency provides opportunities for students to be involved in as many decision making processes as appropriate in a school. It is a student's right to be empowered to have significant input into their learning and their school. There are major benefits to the student's achievement and competence when the learning processes are a partnership with the student at the centre together with their whanau, school staff and the board of trustees. Student agency is a reflection of democracy.

This report sets out the purpose of the study and student agency is defined. The report then focusses on the theory behind student agency. There is a synthesis of discussions with students, teachers and senior leadership staff at a number of schools. This is followed by an outline of the implications and benefits in shifting to an agentic way of being in a school.

Purpose

The purpose of this research is to develop an indepth understanding of student agency so that I can then implement this concept in a robust way at East Tamaki School.

There are already many opportunities for students to have a voice at East Tamaki School therefore it is time to take this to a new level – students having many opportunities to be agentic learners. The benefits to students and their learning are likely to be significant. Studies have shown that when student agency is embedded well, the benefits include increased achievement and lifelong competencies for learners. At East Tamaki School, as with all schools, we are constantly focused on these two aspects as our core function. Therefore employing another significant strategy to support what we are already doing can only be beneficial.

Definition

Student agency can be regarded as a subset of human agency. Human agency allows people to use their initiative and abilities to act in a desired direction or toward desired goals. (Toshalis & Nakkula, 2012). Agents must be active, actions must be genuinely embedded as part of the natural order of an organisation and these actions can be explained by the agent's reasons for acting. (Mayr, 2011).

Student agency, or learner agency as it is sometimes called, means that students are actively involved in choices and decisions related to their education. It is also the implementation of these choices and decisions. Students take a genuine and active role in their futures rather than others doing this for them. (Bandura, 2006; Green, Liem, Martin, March, McInerney, 2012; Wigfield et al., 2015).

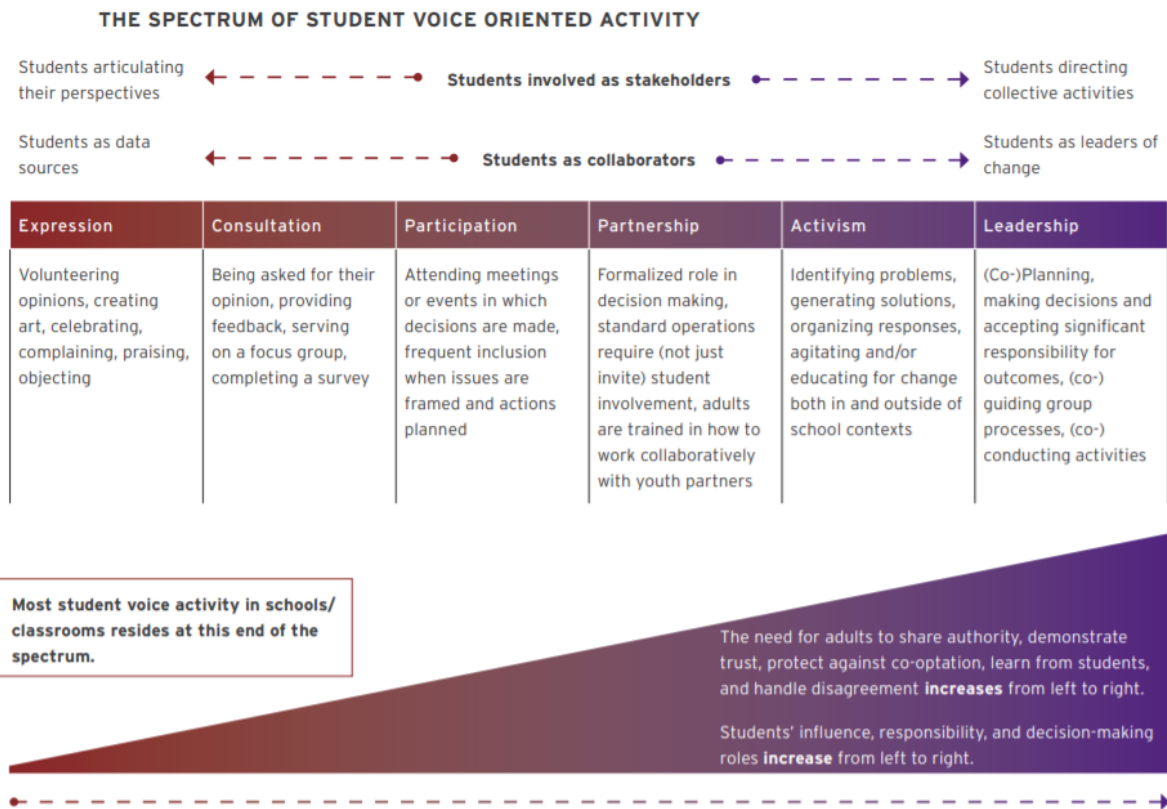
Student agency has been defined in the New Zealand context as students “having the power, combined with choices, to make meaningful action and see the results of your decisions. It can be thought of as a catalyst for change or transformation.” (Wenmoth, 2017, p.60).

Cook-Sather (2006) describes student agency as having a legitimate perspective, presence and active role. Studies such as Wolk (1998) argue that everyone has a voice and therefore this is not something that can be ‘given’. It is something that needs to be listened to, valued acknowledged and included in the everyday processes of a school.

Note that in the literature the terms student voice and student agency are used. At times they are used to mean the same thing and sometimes they are used for different concepts. In this research I am using the term student agency to mean something distinct from student voice. The distinction I make is that student voice involves allowing students to have a say and be listened to. Student (or learner) agency takes this to a higher level. Students do have a say and are listened to and then there is a subsequent action, responsibility, engagement and respect. Students have a leadership role in the school. They make decisions and accept responsibility for the outcomes. (see fig.1). They are leaders of change. It is therefore student agency rather than student voice which is the focus of this research.

Figure 1

This table was published in Toshalis and Nakkula, p 24



Methodology

For this research I have visited a number of schools which have been recognised for their successful, high level implementation of student agency. During these visits I had discussions with students, teachers and senior leaders about the processes of implementation, what student agency includes at each school and the benefits and the challenges. I also read relevant documentation.

I have had discussions with a focus group of students at East Tamaki School for this research. The focus group was made up of twelve students – six boys and six girls with all ethnicities at school included. The students were in years 3-6. The outcome of these discussions will contribute to ensuring that the way student agency is implemented is relevant to East Tamaki School.

The teachers at East Tamaki School have begun to do some reading about student agency. They have then considered what student agency means and how it could become a focus for us. The thoughts of the teachers have influenced my research.

Student agency was a focus at a recent board of trustees meeting at East Tamaki School. The board members considered ways to include students more in the

decision-making processes of the school. They also discussed the practicalities of doing this.

I have also read many studies, articles and examples of student agency so that this research is underpinned by theory. This will support the practical development and implementation of student agency at East Tamaki School.

Findings

Student agency could be said to be ultimately derived from the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child 1989. New Zealand is a signatory to this convention. This means that the government has agreed to ensure that everyone who is working with and for children knows and understands their responsibilities to uphold children's rights. This includes the obligation to involve children in decisions that affect them.

Article 12(1) of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989):

States Parties shall assure to the child who is capable of forming his or her own views the right to express those views freely in all matters affecting the child, the views of the child being given due weight in accordance with the age and maturity of the child.

Therefore embedding student agency is more than good practice. It is an internationally legally binding obligation. With the level of autonomy given to schools in New Zealand it is up to each school to determine how this obligation is implemented but there is no choice as to whether or not to implement it.

Student agency has more recently had an increased focus but is not a new concept in educational theory. Dewey (1916) focused on students being active participants in their learning. He believed that learning is a social and communal process with the child at the centre. Students should be given the knowledge and opportunities to become life long learners rather than becoming passive and compliant learners.

Having defined student agency we can now consider practices which ensure it becomes part of the natural order of a school.

As set out in Figure 1 there is a continuum on a spectrum of opportunities for student agency. At the lower end of the spectrum students have the opportunity to volunteer their opinions, celebrate, complain and the like. These are low level opportunities for student voice. At the opposite end of the spectrum students co-plan, make decisions, co-guide processes and the like. This is student agency.

It is important to consider that implementing and embedding student agency takes time. There are many facets to it and many groups involved. It is a journey of implementation which requires everyone in the school community to be a part of, to understand and have input into the process. It cannot simply be imposed. “Student voice [agency] is a process, not an event.” (Quaglia and Fox, 2018, p.16). Most importantly, the students need to be included in the implementation in partnership with the rest of the community.

The key is to start with the idea that we must include students as key players in the structure of their own learning, each and every one of them, at an individual level. If we don’t, we are simply teaching them to be followers, and the act of following is so rarely done whole-heartedly. (cultureofyes, 2013, p.3).

It is also important to put in place genuinely shared processes which do not result in tokenism of this concept. Schools must provide the right conditions to shift the ownership of teaching and learning to the learners.

Ongoing professional development will need to be provided for staff and students. This includes during the initial stages of shifting to an agentic model, embedding and reflecting on, and sustaining the model. Teachers will need to view students as active participants in their own learning.

According to Quaglia and Fox (2018) “[t]here must be an effort to ensure that all students, staff – the entire organisation – are ready and willing for the voices of students to be heard and valued.” (p.15).

Possibly the first step that needs to be completed is an understanding of what student agency is by all staff. Through this the staff will need to come on to an understanding that their role will change. “The role of a teacher is shifting, they should demonstrate how to learn as opposed to dictating what to learn.” (ARUP, 2018, p.22).

Teachers need to become learners in the classroom too. “Experimentation, exploration, investigation – these are the activities the student-centred learning teacher can share with students... With chief learners [teachers] and associate learners [students] all motivated and engaged in learning from one another, the practice of student centred learning becomes wholly inclusive, because everyone is a student. The rewards of learning and teaching in such an environment are hard to overestimate.” (Toshalis & Nakkula, 2012, p.33-34).

The centre of control will shift from the teacher to give the students ownership of their learning. Teachers will let go of this ownership and allow more choice for students. The focus for the teacher becomes one of how to learn rather than what

to learn. Teachers can constantly look for ways to incorporate choice, expression and self-determination in learning.

Once staff have an understanding of and a commitment to student agency then the students can become involved in the process. There will need to be significant input from the teachers so students too understand what being an agentic learner entails. Teachers will have to specifically teach this and the skills to ensure its success. As part of this, students should be made aware that agency involves responsibilities and respect.

Once students have the skills to be agentic they then must have consistent opportunities to use them. “Voice [agency] cannot be reserved for the ‘extra’ spaces in a school day. All students need consistent opportunities to experience using their voices and develop a sense of ownership for what and how they learn. Some students may need more practice formulating and articulating their opinions than others, but *all* students deserve consistent opportunities to practise and realise the potential of their voice. (Quaglia & Fox, 2018, p.17).

Student agency is appropriate at all age levels. Research suggests that even from the first day at school students should know that, “My voice is my choice. It is special to me.” (Quaglia & Quaglia 2017)

Shifting a school to include a high level of student agency is not just about the people – students, staff and the board members. It is also about changing policies, processes and procedures. All of these must reflect this shift. They must support the change, enhance and facilitate it.

Included in these procedures should be an evaluative process to ensure the success of the change. The process for each school to become agentic is different. However an implementation plan with goals is a good starting point. Success can then be measured based on progress towards achieving these. The goals would be continuously reassessed and evaluated. Note however that not everything is measurable. For example it is not easy to measure a love for learning, a passion for inquiry and enthusiasm for creativity.

Sitting behind all the successful processes and implementation of student agency is relationships. Fullan (2002) suggests that improving relationships in schools is essential to improving schools. The relationships between all participants in the school will change for the better. In particular, students will have a relationship with the staff which is more of a partnership than previously. The level of trust between staff and students will increase.

The concepts around student agency are identified in the New Zealand Curriculum (2007) in several places. The vision states that students “will be confident, connected, actively involved, and lifelong learners” (p.8).

The principles in the curriculum are expected to underpin all school decision making. One of these principles is learning to learn. This is defined as “[t]he curriculum encourages all students to reflect on their own learning processes and to learn how to learn.” (New Zealand Curriculum, 2007, p.9).

The curriculum also provides some characteristics of effective assessment. This includes involving students so that they “discuss, clarify, and reflect on their goals, strategies, and progress with their teachers, their parents and one another. This develops student’s capacity for self and peer assessment, which in turn lead to increased self-direction.” (New Zealand Curriculum, 2007, p.40).

Two of the key competencies in the curriculum also include student agency. They are participating and contributing as well as managing self.

New Zealand schools therefore have a mandate to implement student agency and arguably more than this it is a requirement.

For the purposes of this research I had discussions with a focus group of students. The discussions were informal with the students being asked some initial questions to facilitate their input of ideas. They came up with a number of ways that they could be more agentic. These ideas were mainly at the lower end of the student agency continuum. This was because they were unaware of some of the processes of the school that they could become a part of. For example, they did not know that the school has three goals in the strategic plan. Therefore they did not know that they could contribute to developing and implementing these goals.

However the students did have some real insight in other decision making areas. They wanted to be included more in determining the learning focus for each term and how achievement of this would be assessed. In regard to achievement they wanted even more information than they are currently given about assessment of reading, writing and mathematics. One child asked if the teachers could sit with each child and “do the marking with us. So we are not just given our assessment result but we see where it came from.”

There is a student leadership group at school which the students really liked but they felt that it was “just a small group of good students.” They wondered if there could be other groups for a wider range of students. Note that besides the student leadership group at East Tamaki School we have the following leadership groups for students, an enviro group, a health team, learning community leaders and a library leadership team.

The learning community leaders in the focus group felt their contributions to the learning community were valued. They particularly enjoyed seeing some of their ideas implemented. They wanted to contribute even more than at present. “We might be able to organise the discussions so the teachers don’t have to. Maybe we could even be the leader of discussions.” This indicates that students have some agency and are keen for and can see a pathway to have more.

There was a range of other ideas the students suggested. These included students managing all aspects of fundraising events such as cake stalls, an increase in tuakana-teina opportunities, students greeting visitors, students choosing what books to buy for the library, writing letters to the board if there were concerns and students managing celebrations.

I discussed with the students some higher level opportunities for them to be included in decisions around their learning. These included having input into developing the strategic goals and implementing them. The older students were very positive about this and especially liked the possibility of writing reports about the goals and presenting these to the board. One student said “we could be like the principal and go to the meetings. Then the board would know what we think. The principal wouldn’t need to tell the board about us. We could tell the board about us.” This is a significant statement. It shows very clearly that the students want to speak for themselves. They are able to think agentically and articulate this.

I had discussions with the teachers at East Tamaki School as an initial step towards increasing student agency. The teachers did some readings around this topic and we synthesised their findings from the readings. The focus was on comparing student agency and student voice.

The teachers identified elements of student voice including:

- it is where adults listen more and speak less
- there is student context around learning and learner needs
- students’ ideas must be acted upon otherwise there is no point in the ideas
- it is appropriate at all levels
- student voice leads to agency and leadership
- voices are actively encouraged
- student voice is appropriate at all age levels and is developed over time
- voice is letting students express their ideas.

The elements of agency identified were:

- agency gives students the power to act

- students are more active in the learning process and decision making
- student agency needs to be authentic and meaningful
- students define their own learning goals, they ask questions and self monitor
- agency needs to be specifically taught
- it has real world relevance and is future focussed
- student voice is a subset of student agency
- teachers need to understand the benefits of allowing students to be agentic
- agency shifts ownership of learning away from the teacher to the student
- agentic learners become agentic adults
- agency requires the right environment
- students have the power to act it is not tokenism.

The teachers recognised that we have started the journey towards high level student agency. They also know that we have some way to go. They could also identify the differences and similarities between agency and voice.

In the discussion with the East Tamaki School board about student agency several ideas arose. Board members suggestions included surveying students to determine how the students want to be involved in decision making processes. One member stated “hear what the students say, especially what are the things that make them excited to come to school.” This statement refers to decision making at school and extends to ensuring students actually want to be at school. At times parents involve the children in deciding whether or not they come to school on a particular day. Therefore, student agency could be said to begin at home before school each day.

The board also suggested students be given ‘projects’ to manage including an art project or planning the school entrance way.

Another suggestion from board members was to “utilise the student leadership team.” They also suggested including students in the planning teams for areas such as mathematics, literacy, Maori and Pasifika plans. This would be moving towards a more advanced level of student agency. It is very positive that the board are willing to embrace student agency as they realise the benefits of it.

For this research I visited a number of schools where student agency is well embedded at a high level.

The school which had the highest level of student agency has been recognised by the Education Review Office (ERO) for their work in this area. Their latest ERO report states that

there are multiple opportunities for students to engage with achievement information. Student groups work with the board and senior leaders to identify and lead initiatives to support school achievement improvement plans. Students are taught strategies to use their own achievement information so they can be actively involved in decisions about how to make progress in their learning. Students also play a role in reporting their progress and achievement to their parents and whanau. The impact of these school practices is that students' engagement is heightened through an increased awareness of themselves as a learner. (Education Review Office report).

Strategies that this school employs to foster this high level of student agency include students having genuine and valued input into the strategic plan. Each of the three goals in the strategic plan has a student team led by a staff member to implement the goal. The teams meet frequently to firstly develop an implementation plan and then to monitor progress. Student input is not tokenism, it is genuine and actioned. The team reports progress to the board with students presenting the report at a board meeting. Towards the end of the year, the teams develop goals for the following year.

Students are taught many agentic processes so that they can work in a true partnership with the staff and board. Students clearly take an active role in the educational direction of the school. They are encouraged and supported to develop leadership abilities and be responsible for their learning. They also have a shared accountability for the strategic direction of the school. This school has a student leadership team also.

Towards the end of each year the current student leadership team organises and implements all the processes to select the team for the following year. The team develops a student team leader role description and an application form. Once applications are received the team read through them and short-list applicants. They then interview and select successful applicants. Throughout the process there is a teacher providing guidance but this is kept to a minimum.

Other areas that students have agency in this school include having input into the topics to be covered, whanau engagement and community initiatives.

This school has developed their agentic learners through an implementation process over a number of years. They began this process by working with the

staff so that they accepted that students could be involved in decision making at all levels of the school. A senior leader stated that “it is not worth embarking on this journey unless you have all the staff on board with the concept. I mean all staff, not just the teachers but the support staff, caretaker, cleaners and admin staff. It is a school wide initiative, not just a teacher one.”

Following this, the focus became the students. They needed to be specifically taught what student agency is and how to be agentic.

At another school I visited the strong student agency focus centred around students being agents of change. This is achieved through engaging inquiry topics which give students opportunities to understand and contribute to a changing society. Teachers are expected to give students opportunities which the teacher may not normally have considered. Students contribute their ideas as to what they would like to learn and the context for this learning. In doing this they are asked to consider the inquiry statement – learning from the past to lead the future.

The inquiry learning results in an action which will lead to change. Students are guided by the teachers but the focus is on the students leading the learning.

This learning approach is well embedded at the school and is clearly part of the natural order there. Students appreciated the partnership that they have with the teachers and the control which they have over their learning. One student stated “we know what we want to learn and the teachers let us learn that. They don’t tell us what we have to learn because we already know.” This is a clear indication that these students have a real awareness of what learning is and they have influence over their own learning.

At the third school I visited students had significant autonomy over many aspects of their education. The school did not have an innovative learning environment with an open plan configuration but students had many opportunities to move between classrooms for learning and to choose their daily timetable.

Teachers indicated that this initiative had been partially successful. One teacher stated that “it suits some students but is quite unsuitable for others.”

The teachers concluded that this approach to student agency may be more successful if the students were specifically taught strategies to be a confident agentic learner.

The students also had variable support for this initiative. Not all students enjoyed having this level of agency over their learning. Some enjoyed the autonomy while others did not. One student stated “I want to stay in my classroom with my

teacher”. This school has elements of student agency in place but they may need to be better scaffolded to be a success.

Implications

In this section I will focus on the implications for East Tamaki School in implementing student agency to a high level. Obviously these implications are likely to be relevant at least in part to other schools.

At East Tamaki School we already have a number of initiatives which include student agency. These are at the lower end of the continuum and include

- student led conferences
- teachers sharing goals and assessment results with students
- student leadership teams including, the student leadership team and library, enviro and learning community teams
- surveys of students
- students having some input into inquiry foci and timetabling
- student input into cultural celebration weeks

Teachers and the board have also begun some initial reading and discussion around student agency.

Given the findings, there is much to gain from adopting a high level of student agency. The process will need to be planned and in particular, it will need to be accepted as a permanent change which will take time to implement. It will involve all school stakeholders, the students, the board, the staff, and the parents and whanau. There are likely to be members of the wider community who should also be involved.

It could seem to be overwhelming as to where to begin but it is important to start. We already have some processes to build on. Throughout the process and in an ongoing way there needs to be reflection, monitoring and evaluation.

A possible indicator of potential success is that students and teachers need to be ready and/or willing to make a shift. “There must be an effort to ensure that all students, staff – the entire organisation – are ready and willing for the voices of students to be heard and valued.” (Quaglia and Quaglia, 2017, p. 15). The teachers and students need to have opportunities to share ideas. Alongside this, the school has to have or establish processes and structures that support student agency. Without this preparation it is likely that people will question the effectiveness of the concept.

The implementation of student agency could begin with the development of a written plan. The plan and its initial implementation may be teacher driven in order to begin. Teacher input would slowly diminish as student input increases so that students are making the decisions. However it should be noted that teachers do not just 'get out of the way' but rather collaborate with the students.

The plan would have input from all stakeholders as it is developed. It may be that representatives from the groups develop the detail of the plan. I would suggest that all teachers are involved as it is they who will have the most influence over successful implementation.

The ideas from these groups should not be pre-empted. However the findings here suggest some common threads that should be explored for inclusion. These include:

- authenticity of student agency
- a shift in the current partnership between students and teachers
- significant professional development for teachers and learning for students of the change in the partnership
- inclusion of all stakeholders
- development of student agency that is specific to East Tamaki School
- a willingness and commitment for change across the school
- structures in place to support student agency

If we look at the continuum in figure 1 these current processes would be at the lower end - expression and consultation with possibly some participation. We have started and there is room for development.

All staff need further professional development in student agency so that they understand it. They need to reach the point that knowing the benefits leads to a commitment to change. Simply understanding the concept is not enough. 'There must be a desire for student driven change. When all stakeholders display a willingness, student voice drives all initiatives.' (Quaglia & Quaglia p17). Teachers also need to feel competent, autonomous and authentic just as the students do.

Once staff have this willingness some practical changes can be implemented. Staff could begin by focussing on a few areas such as student inquiry, timetabling decisions and feedback from students.. Questions such as - what are our students' perspectives? how will we include students as part of the change? and how many of the students' ideas are actioned? will always be part of learning discussions among teachers.

After this initial phase, teachers will reach a point where it would be natural and intrinsic to always include students in all decisions to a level that is appropriate for the students' ages. Teachers must ensure that all students have a platform and opportunities to be included, for example students with special needs, students for whom English is a second language and students who are shy.

Students will need to be specifically taught agentic skills. They need to know what the opportunities are for them to have agency and work collaboratively with staff. They need to know that they are important and valued. This forms part of developing strong relationships. Each student's skills, ideas and relationships with others need developing and applying so that the learning becomes profoundly student centred.

An agentic approach would include finding out from each student what motivates them to learn. The students could then be involved in a discussion about other factors that could increase this motivation. These factors may relate to the learning context or to the student's attitude and behaviour. This will contribute to students leading their learning. There are many practical ways that students can be agentic once they have the necessary skills. These include:

- Making timetabling decisions
- Setting and monitoring goals
- Being involved in assessment processes
- Choosing the inquiry focus
- Supporting peers with their learning
- Reviewing aspects of school processes, reporting and presenting to the Board
- Collaborating with staff to set, implement, monitor and evaluate strategic goals
- Reporting achievement to their parents
- Writing newsletters
- Initiating and implementing programmes and processes
- Being a part of all committees, groups and teams if appropriate
- Conducting surveys
- Leading initiatives

There will be many activities besides these. However they will only be agentic if the students' input is genuine, valued and actioned. The students will be empowered leaders of their learning and so their future.

Benefits

The benefits for implementing an agentic approach are many particularly for the students. They become the agents of change. Hattie (2012) recognises the importance of student agency in his meta-analysis which shows that students having control over their learning has a high effect size therefore the impact on achievement is significant. Another benefit is that students become more motivated resulting in an increase in achievement. Students are more engaged in their learning and have more say over it so become more motivated. Studies have shown that students' motivations tend to be stronger, more resilient and more easily sustained when the motivation comes from within the student rather than from coercion. (Eccles & Wigfeld, 2002; Ryan & Deci, 2000).

Students develop a stronger sense of respect and self-worth and see themselves as a learner when they have agency. Students are able to take their agentic strategies and knowledge into adulthood and so become lifelong learners. "Agentic children turn into agentic adults". (Wenmoth, 2017, p.60). Studies have shown that student agency leads to greater classroom participation (Garcia, Kilgore, Rodriguez, and Thomas, 1995; Rudduck & Flutter, 2000) and decreases in behavioural issues. (Freiburg & Lamb, 2009).

Teachers benefit through having better relationships with students and their families. They better understand how students think and feel about their learning. Teachers gain information which helps them facilitate the learning process for themselves and their students. Teachers are also able to connect better with parents as agentic students are able to enhance the home-school partnership.

In order to stay connected and relevant teachers and schools need to include student agency as an embedded process.

Conclusion

Student agency requires a redefinition of the role of students in their learning and their participation in school. Students already make many decisions all the time in their lives, they are capable of doing this. Schools have a responsibility to support and embed the power and potential of student agency.

Student agency is an ongoing process unique to each school. As the school community works through this process, the sophistication of agency will advance. This requires reflection so that schools always listen, collaborate and act with

students. Students need to know that if they act strategically they can accomplish their goals.

Schools must get to the stage where students become indispensable in school processes. The position of students in schools must be valued so that authority and responsibility for decisions is a shared partnership between students and staff.

“Meaningful participation in issues that impact children is ‘the right of a child and not the gift of adults.’ (Welty & Lundy, 2013, p.4).

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