BUILDING AGENCY IN THE INCLUSIVE CLASSROOM THROUGH STUDENT-CENTERED LEARNING

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INTRODUCTION TO THE RESEARCH

In *Empower: What Happens When Students Own Their Learning*, A.J. Juliani perhaps said it best: "Our job is not to prepare students for something; instead, our role is to help students prepare themselves for anything" (p. xxxiii). Teacher-centered, 'Sage on the Stage,' direct instruction—there are a dozen terms for this approach to teaching, yet they all translate the same: the teacher is the expert, doling out knowledge on their terms for students to receive. It's Paulo Freire's (1970/2008) classic concept of the banking model, assigning the teacher all knowledge and agency while students are treated as objects to be talked at instead of talked with (p. 242). Perhaps it's not always taken to such extremes, but this is the mindset at the heart of this approach: teaching is transmission; it is not, *cannot* be, a co-occurring learning experience, continuously adapting to the needs of students and their world. Yet when the teacher acts solely as the expert, they create a dependency upon that expertise. As Robert Welker (1991) concludes in his article, "Expertise and the Teacher as Expert: Rethinking a Questionable Metaphor," "the teacher whose knowledge has not been used to make the student less dependent has failed" (p. 35). If students do not finish their education able to think and act critically and independently as they interact with a world constantly bombarding them with new perspectives, what has been the point of our instruction? The goal of the teacher must be the creation of a confident, lifelong learner ready to meet the civic, social, and intellectual demands of our society. Thus, research supports a mass switch from the traditional, teacher-centered approach to collaborative, student-centered learning, where the inclusion and agency of all students is not only encouraged but expected.

Centering on TPEP Criteria 1, 2, and 3, the goal of this inquiry project will be to explain how and why teachers should focus on developing agency in students by setting high expectations and then helping students meet them. One of the foundations of my inquiry is an expansive definition of inclusion that considers all students traditionally excluded from consideration in educational design, not only the "SPED" kids. To this end, I prefer to use the Sheridan Center for Teaching and Learning's definition: "Inclusive teaching is an explicit intellectual and affective inclusion of all students into our fields and disciplines, through course content, assessment, and/or pedagogy."

INTEGRATING APPROACHES
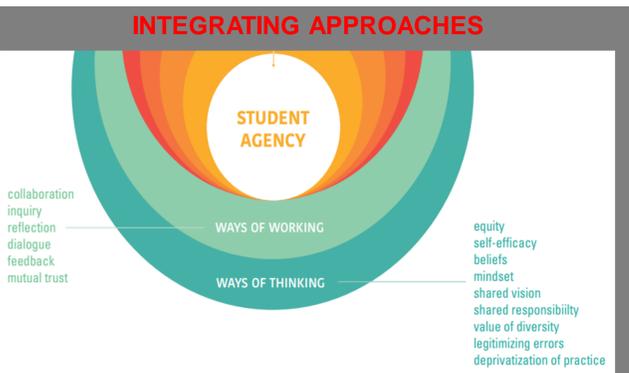
Building student agency in the classroom, requires the teacher to relinquish control but not consideration or structure. It requires the teacher to understand and integrate key pedagogical concepts with a humanistic, whole person view of our students. The consensus of so many of our developments in pedagogy is that supporting student agency is vital to all of our students' learning.

Siddall (2016) summarizes in his article for the Aurora Institute: "As the WestEd team points out in their research brief *How Students Learn…To Learn*, deeper learning truly takes hold when the student herself perceives a gap between where she is and where she wants to be, and takes action to close that gap. In other words, great instruction only takes a student so far. Agency, cultivated over an extended period of time, allows students to make the most important connections and decisions themselves." Students must be able to independently shape:

- **Metacognitive practices** (e.g. goal setting, monitoring progress toward these goals, reflecting)
- **Motivation** and feelings of self-efficacy
- **Behavioral changes** (e.g. seeking out help, finding a quiet place to work).

WHAT IS STUDENT AGENCY?

First, I should say, there is no broad consensus on the definition of student agency. Many different words are used to describe the concept, and sometimes the same words are used to describe different concepts. That said, by looking across researchers, practitioners, and other thought leaders, common elements arise that begin to suggest a consensus.
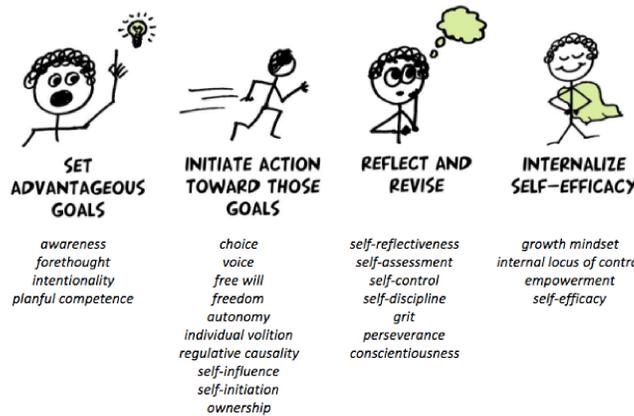
From these sources, the dust seems to settle on a concept of "student agency" that involves four distinct components. The first three are temporally linked covering future, present, and past:

- Setting advantageous goals;
- Initiating action toward those goals; and
- Reflecting on and regulating progress toward those goals.

Several sources also agree on a fourth dimension, that undergirds the others—a belief in self-efficacy. That is, whether one believes they can act with agency actually enhances or diminishes that agency.

*quoted from Jennifer Davis Poon (2018)*

FOUR COMPONENTS OF STUDENT AGENCY

SET ADVANTAGEOUS GOALS	INITIATE ACTION TOWARD THOSE GOALS	REFLECT AND REVISE	INTERNALIZE SELF–EFFICACY
awareness forethought intentionality planful competence	choice voice free will freedom autonomy individual volition regulative causality self-influence self-initiation ownership	self-reflectiveness self-assessment self-control self-discipline grit perseverance conscientiousness	growth mindset internal locus of control empowerment self-efficacy

HAMMOND & FREIRE: LEARNED HELPLESSNESS AND THE NEUROSCIENCE OF LEARNING

To make inclusion function as it should, teachers must be willing to empower their students and each other in the classroom. When Paulo Freire (1970/2008) identified and then challenged the traditional model of education, he addressed the ideological and sociological concerns of a teacher-centered approach. When he declared, "Education as the exercise of domination stimulates the credulity of students, with the ideological intent (often not perceived by educators) of indoctrinating them to adapt to the world of oppression," Freire made the case that the teacher-centered model fails to open a meaningful dialogue and so trains students to accept a one-sided dynamic in which they are voiceless and powerless (p. 248). This dynamic and the learned helplessness it generates parallels the experience of other traditionally excluded students as well, as Zaretta Hammond argues in *Culturally Responsive Teaching and the Brain*. Referencing the most recent developments in neuroscientific research, Hammond explains how students who feel unheard, unseen, and disempowered in school, cannot feel safe enough to learn in the classroom. Research has revealed that students who do not feel safe actually *cannot* learn, as the parts of their brain necessary for learning cannot engage while those focused on self-defense are active. Thus, a truly inclusive classroom must center on growing agency in students - they must be empowered to achieve more than they believe they are capable of and to assess their own growth and capabilities accurately.

However, it is vital to a culturally response perspective of agency to consider how our students may enact agency differently than white American's might expect. For instance, students from non-Western, more collectivist cultures may consider agency to be the practice of restraint or of valuing social harmony over individual desires. That this may not look the way the majority of teachers expect agency to look, does not lessen its value. It simply highlights how teachers must continuously check their own biases and expand their perspectives.
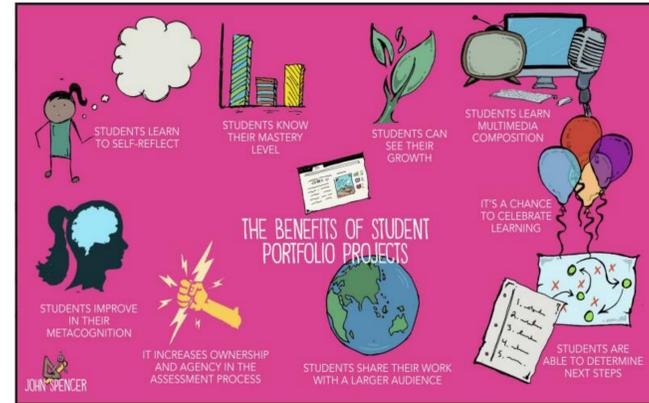
TOOLS

- **Portfolios**

  - Self-Assessment: "As a component of a variety of assessment practices, [self-assessment] can foster students' involvement and inclusion in choices about their own learning. By strengthening students' sense of identity and belonging through self-assessment, it is possible to counter the impact of assessment practices that might normally serve to exclude and marginalise them" (Bourke & Mentis, 2013, p. 854).

  - Students identify and set their own goals, measuring their own progress toward achieving them.

  - Promoting a growth mindset through revision and reflection.

- **Rubrics**: Designed by students, or by students in collaboration with teachers.

- **Choice Menus**

- **Accessibility Technology**: Speech-to-text and text-to-speech software, subtitles, Rewordify and Newsela to adjust language level to student needs, alternative seating and lighting.

ACTION PLAN & SUPPORTING THEORIES

➢ Relinquish control: give students as much choice as possible in their learning, from materials to assessment.

➢ Plan with UDL in mind, ensuring all materials are accessible and all goals/targets are achievable.

➢ Choose culturally-relevant topics and materials. Share diverse perspectives and validate diverse ways of learning.

➢ Solicit regular feedback from students about their learning.

➢ Use trauma-informed practices:

Garcia, Marlatt, McDermott, and O'Byrne (2021) acknowledge teacher concerns that student-centered learning "conflicts with the hierarchical nature of schooling, where teachers are routinely evaluated on how well they get students to comply. It involves risk, mistakes, and failure. But it also creates a classroom environment that sustains the curiosity and engagement of both the students and the teacher." As John Spencer has pointed out, "we need to move from **entertaining** our students ('The kids **love** this activity!') to **engaging** them by connecting them with real ideas that matter, and then go further to **empowering** them to seek out the learning for themselves instead of waiting for it to be delivered" (Terborg, 2017). This is how we start countering learned helplessness. This is how we create lifelong learners.

REFERENCES:

TABLE 1
The implementation of strategies to incorporate student voice is critical
Poor to ideal implementation, affected grade levels, and areas of influence of each strategy

E Elementary school
M Middle school
H High school

Strategy	Area of influence	Poor Implementation		Ideal implementation
Student Surveys E M H	• Instruction • School policies • District policies • State policies	Data are collected occasionally and are not reported to key stakeholders or used to influence key decisions. This strategy includes only superficial topics.	Data are collected regularly. The survey covers important topics such as school climate, instruction, and teacher and administrative quality and effectiveness. Results are given to stakeholders and influence decisions.	Students contribute to the survey design or a subset of survey items. Students analyze survey data and create a plan for student action.
Student Perspectives on Governing Bodies M H	• Instruction • School policies • District policies • State policies	The governing body has one student representative who is an advisory, nonvoting member and who is hand-picked by an administrator.	The student has to be elected by their peers to become the student representative on a governing body; the student is able to vote on limited issues.	The governing body has multiple student representatives, and every member has the same power and responsibilities. There are diverse perspectives among the student representatives.
Student Government or Councils E M H	• Instruction • School policies • District policies	Turnout is low and nonrepresentative of population. Elected student leaders manage or consult on superficial student activities irrelevant to school structure, such as prom or community service events.	The student government partners with the administration to propose initiatives that can shift school culture, such as coordinating a schoolwide student and community survey.	The student government is autonomous with budget authority and diverse representation. The body has a structure to regularly collect opinions of the full student body.
Student Journalism M H	• Instruction • School policies • District policies • State policies	Students cover limited, often superficial topics; readership is low.	Students identify topics, with input from teachers, that are important to the student population and school community.	Students are responsible for the production of the newspaper from start to finish, including selection of content, editing process, and release. Teachers ensure content is appropriate.
Democratic Classroom Practices E M H	• Instruction • School policies	The class brainstorms classroom rules at the beginning of the school year. The teacher rarely revisits them or reengages students to adjust the rules.	The class brainstorms and votes on topics or projects to explore in a unit of study.	The class regularly brainstorms solutions to challenges, including conflict resolution, and co-creates curriculum and assessment methods. The teacher periodically asks students for feedback on classroom processes.
Student-led conferences E M H	• Instruction • School policies	The student leads a short, scripted portion of a parent-teacher conference; the teacher and parent do not ask for the student's opinion during the rest of the conference.	Students prepare a portfolio of work for the conference, and a teacher describes how the work reflects learning goals.	Students describe how their work meets learning goals; the teacher and parent consistently engage student to develop solutions to academic, behavioral, and social challenges.
Youth-led Participatory Action Research E M H	• School policies • District policies • State policies	A research question is developed by adults, and students serve as data sources and/or data collectors.	Students partner with teachers to create a research question and a plan for data collection. The group is not given dedicated time to work on their project nor training to support quality research and policy analysis.	Students create a research question that addresses an oppressive issue in their school or area. Students develop a plan for data collection and present recommendations to a decision-making body. Students take action to effect change.
Personalized Learning E M H	• Instruction	Students can choose between three options for essay topics.	Students work with teachers to develop questions to explore in each area of study.	Students work with teachers to create their own learning plan. Each student can demonstrate mastery of learning goals in various ways, including project-based learning, at their own pace.

Source: For more information about the implementation of youth participatory action research, see YPAR Hub, "Continuum of Youth Participation & Engagement" available at http://yparhub.berkeley.edu/get-started-lessons/continuum-of-youth-participation-engagement (last accessed June 2019).

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