




MULTIPLE CHOICE

More schools are helping students get involved in their own learning through initiatives that build agency, voice, and instructional input

BY BARBARA PAPE



Student agency is trumpeted in newspapers, education journals, conferences, and many schools as something we want to elevate.

But cultivating student agency means much more than handing over the adult’s microphone or letting students decide which book to read. Activating student agency depends on a school environment that builds trust and relationships among students and adults.

Student agency requires each student to experience a sense of belonging in all classes and activities. Authentic student agency also depends on rigorous teaching and learning that relies on understanding each student in a “whole-child” way.

So, what is student agency? While there is no one definition, common elements have surfaced to describe it. Jennifer Davis Poon, a fellow at the Center for Innovation in Education, summarizes four concepts central to student agency:

1. Setting advantageous goals;
2. Initiating action toward those goals;
3. Reflecting on and regulating progress toward those goals; and
4. Creating a belief in self-efficacy.

Within Poon’s framework sit student voice and choice, as well as ownership—other terms tossed about in today’s efforts to transform education by engaging students. The examples that follow demonstrate the power of this framework.

For Scott Cavanas, principal of Alvarado Intermediate School in Rowland Heights, California, student agency means “making sure students have a place at the table.” He and his team look for opportunities for students to have a say in their learning and showcase their gifts and talents; these can then be celebrated by teachers and staff members.

Cavanoas also stresses the importance of allyship in developing student voice. By this he means that students are capable of advocating for themselves and for others. “It’s when a student notices injustices, not just in bullying, but when they become an ally in their classmates’ learning,” he says—noticing when another student might need assistance with reading or more time to process a question, for example.

Is It Worth the Effort?

Rethinking classroom practice and design and spending more time bringing students into the teaching and learning equation seems like a lot of work. Is it even possible to accomplish in the elementary years?

There are numerous reasons to elevate and amplify student agency. One reason is that it can greatly increase a student’s motivation to engage in learning, even among younger students who tend to already be enthusiastic about beginning their learning journey. Motivation—and particularly intrinsic motivation—is a key factor in learning.

Motivation is a factor that connects to cognitive flexibility and self-regulation in the early grades for critical thinking, mastery of content, and collaboration with peers. Other reasons to promote student agency and voice are to help develop self-awareness, social awareness, self-management, and more. These skills—along with cognitive and content development—will guide students from the classroom into the world beyond.

“When the teacher gives us choices, it helps me to learn because I can choose the one I know the most about or I can choose the one I want to learn about,” says a third-grade student.

Building the Foundations

While nurturing student agency can lead to increased student motivation, developing it will depend upon the strength of a student's relationships, both student-to-teacher and student-to-student.

"Building relationships is important because we are like a second family, and we always work with each other," a fifth-grade student at Villacorta Elementary says. "When you have a good relationship with someone, it's easy to learn with them."

Before student agency and voice can take hold, learners must feel safe and trust their teachers and the school community at large. To develop this sense of trust, learners need to know that the people around them understand their uniqueness, including their cultural backgrounds and their academic needs. Through relationship-building, teachers can also model key social skills in collaboration, empathy, respect, and compassion. In other words, "another person well-known is a good thing," says a fifth-grade student with ADHD and autism.

5 Takeaways From Student Agency Initiatives

1. Start with relationships. A level of trust among teachers and students and students and their peers is fundamental for student agency to flourish.

2. Understand the whole child. Lead with social and emotional learning to promote diversity, equity, and inclusion for groups of students who historically have been marginalized in schools or communities. The goal is that all students can be seen and heard.

3. Create a school environment that showcases mutual respect. Schoolwide allyship encourages all voices to rise.

4. Provide professional learning experiences. Build teachers' understanding of the variability of each learner in order to put strategies in place that boost student agency and voice.

5. Keep standards high. Customize pathways for students to lead their own work and achieve their goals within a rigorous framework.

"Engaging in important dialogue with students is key," says Julie Mitchell, superintendent of Rowland Unified School District. "Just because one holds the title of educator and they are students does not reduce their role."

Listening to Student Voices

The following are examples of schools and districts that have strived to cultivate and nurture student agency and voice, and the results they have achieved.

Conference plans. The Students for Equitable Education (SEE) Summit—a multidistrict, nationwide effort—is creating a student-led conference that will empower students to impact change in the design and operation of schools.

Led by Mitchell and fellow superintendent Marlon Styles of Middletown (Ohio) City Schools, the SEE Summit brought together high school students, teachers, and mentors in April for a virtual conference. Students selected conference session topics such as "Teaching Real History and Real Current Events on Social Justice Issues" and "Cultural Inclusivity and Encouraging Diverse Expression" and worked with an assigned mentor to develop each session.

Following the murder of George Floyd in Minneapolis and the subsequent growth of the Black Lives Matter movement, both superintendents felt that the time was past due to work to promote student agency and voice to build stronger relationships among students and teachers, as well as enhance a collaborative school culture.

While this is a high school program, its intentionality can serve as a model for younger students to identify topics that matter to them and celebrate their identities and those of their peers, collaborate with classes or schools to create events by them and for them, and develop strong and trusting relationships with teachers.

Ensuring that all voices are heard. Alvarado Intermediate spotlights four core beliefs that pave the way for student agency and voice: that all students have gifts; that all students have futures; that all students need teachers in class as well as among peers, family, and the community; and that every day is an opportunity to be the greatest version of oneself. Tapping into these core beliefs, Alvarado's goal of nurturing student agency and voice is built upon the acknowledgment of, and respect for, the voice of others—what Cavanas calls allyship.

"When student voice is not grounded in the belief that includes all students, you run the risk that only certain groups of kids feel empowered," says instructional coach Jessica Delavigne. "We make sure we remain aligned with our core beliefs in order not to let this happen and to ensure the sustainability and authenticity of each student's voice."

Cavanoas says that authentic student voice also is made possible by the school's three Rs: Relationships, Responsive instruction practices, and Reflection. The school binds these and its core beliefs together into a project-based learning (PBL) approach schoolwide, which culminates in the

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student-led Learning Showcase, a daylong tour of student presentations on self-selected projects.

Cavani and Delavigne take pride that all students are able to participate, pick a project, and decide how to present it. Along the way, they work collaboratively, develop bonds with teacher-mentors, learn to express themselves, and reflect on what worked and what might be done differently.

More voice in math. At Villacorta Elementary School, the paradigm has shifted away from only valuing the correct answer to nurturing an appreciation for the thinking behind the answer. That's where student voice enters the equation.

Moving to an asset-building approach has validated students' thinking processes, with the end result being more agency, voice, and overall engagement in math. Principal George Herrera says he can tell which students have "grown up on campus longer, because they are more willing to take risks—more willing to explore and be comfortable discovering their own mistakes."

"I work harder because I feel like I am in charge of my learning when I can pick the choice that interests me the most," a third-grade student says.

Students unpack problems with their teachers, then go to small groups to figure out how to solve them. They can articulate that "they get this part, but not that part, which is shifting from saying 'I got the wrong answer' to thinking about the process," Herrera says.

While there are still math tests, "it's different cramming for a test versus providing experiences that increase test scores," he adds. The goal is for scores to "be part of good learning and good skills."

Inquiring minds. At Ybarra Academy of Arts and Technology in Walnut, California, social-emotional learning (SEL) and space for risk-taking in class and schoolwide "gives us a freeway to student voice," says principal Annette Ramirez. "We want to know our students as people, not just learners." The school offers an Identity Day, on which students and teachers share what makes them who they are in order to build relationships and trust.

Ramirez attributes at least some of Ybarra's strength in cultivating student voice to being an International Baccalaureate (IB) school in which students drive learning. Through professional learning experiences, teachers develop an understanding that student talk—not teacher lecture—inspires motivation and helps students express their needs. "Teaching through inquiry is all about student agency," she says.

Teachers in the early grades work with learners to create a risk-free environment. Students choose their own projects, and for transitional kindergarten through first grade, teachers use play-based learning to provide opportunities to express voice and choice.

Arguing for agency. In partnership with Argument-Centered Education (ACE), Brooklyn Laboratory (LAB) Charter Schools in New York City moved student agency and voice to the debate stage this year. The debate topic centers on two questions: one on COVID-19 protocols and discipline; the other regarding a vaccine. Students dig deep into the research, form opinions, and engage in a civil debate.

One goal is to "help school communities work through available evidence and take ownership of public-health-informed, equitable choices along the way," says Eric Tucker, LAB co-founder and executive director. Another is to strengthen voice among the school's grade 6–12 students through evidence-based discussion and exploration.

The protocols of debate provide guardrails for civil discussion, and evidence-based protocols offer rigor for students to develop critical thinking. Within this framework, students back up their voice with facts and learn how to recognize and discuss opposing viewpoints civilly. "Structured debate is a means for people to disagree respectfully and productively," Tucker and Les Lynn, founder and CEO of Argument-Centered Education, wrote recently in a *Chicago Tribune* article.

Student agency and voice aren't light switches that can be turned on suddenly. It takes intentional effort to lay the groundwork that provides learners with the trust and confidence they need to take ownership of their learning.

"Imagine if educators stopped giving students our platforms to amplify their voices, but instead gave students the platforms they want and need to amplify their voices," says Styles. "If students are provided what they need, imagine the impact they will have on this world." ●

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