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## **Factors in Agency Development: A Supervisory Teaching Perspective**

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*Abstract: Promoting student agency is an emerging priority in education. Supervisory teaching is a potentially useful approach for supporting agency development. This approach includes two characteristics, namely, tutorial learning conversations between the teacher and a group of one to four students, and students learning independently for extended periods of time. Supervisory teaching lessons in three primary-school classrooms were observed over a period of five months and teachers were interviewed as part of the data collection process. Five key factors were found to support students to have more agency in their learning: independence and ownership, scaffolding, students as teachers, joyfulness, and reflection. The findings point toward several factors observed within supervisory teaching that led to greater student agency, including individualised learning conversations, allowing students control over their learning, the benefit of reduced structure in the learning environment, and the fact that joyfulness in learning is a significant factor in elevating student agency.*

### **Introduction**

In the field of education, the search for more effective pedagogical approaches is unceasing. As new knowledge is created, new potentialities for enhanced professional practice emerge. Perspectives both old and new await deeper scrutiny and a more thorough synthesis. An aim of this scrutiny is more effective mechanisms for enhancing learning in classrooms. The research presented in this paper delves into the potential links in primary-school education (students from five to twelve years old) between a pedagogical approach and the development of an essential human attribute. The pedagogical approach has been labelled supervisory teaching and has a history that stretches back to the dawn of Western philosophy (Palfreyman, 2008). The attribute is human agency, which refers to the capacity of individuals to act with purpose and intentionality in their world (Bandura, 2008). The research explores the ways a supervisory teaching approach might enhance the agency of learners in primary-school classrooms.

A central focus of this research was to identify pedagogical dynamics that allow for power sharing and enable learner agency. Charteris and Smardon (2019, p. 9) state that “students may be held back from being agentic, if teachers are not prepared to power share or perhaps are not recognising possibilities for student agency and are not prepared to match the opportunities that they provide with the potential capabilities of their students”. In this research we attempt to identify the ways a pedagogical approach may empower even very young students to act with agency in their learning.

## Literature Review

In this section, the literature relevant to supervisory teaching is briefly discussed, followed by an exploration of agency with a focus on student agency and how supervisory teaching might encourage its development.

### Supervisory Teaching

Supervisory teaching is the name we have given to a pedagogical approach that has two key components. Phase One involves the teacher engaging in dialogue around a specific topic and/or artefact in a small group setting (Lane Fox, 2008), with one to four students. In Phase Two, when not engaged with the teacher in this tutorial learning, students work autonomously on tasks that require minimal contact between the student and teacher but might include purposeful interaction with peers.

The supervisory style of teaching and learning has its roots in the earliest of scholarly activity, possibly with Socrates (Lane Fox, 2008). Variations of supervisory teaching played an important part in early European universities (Moore, 1968) and endure in universities such as Cambridge and Oxford. The term *supervisory teaching* was selected for this research because we believe it captures the essence of this ancient approach and can guide those who are new to the concept towards a clearer understanding. Therefore, it should be noted that supervisory teaching, although it has a fresh name, is not a new pedagogical approach.

Supervisory teaching also exists in various adaptations in primary schooling. Within the international school context, where this research took place, there are several notable pedagogies in tune with a supervisory teaching approach. Two relevant models are Reading and Writing Workshop (Calkins, 2006) and The Daily Five (Boushey & Moser, 2014). Both models follow a similar format to supervisory teaching in higher education. The approach involves the teacher scaffolding and guiding students to learn without direct assistance or intervention during independent working time, while teaching time is spent engaging in learning conversations of varying lengths with an individual or small group. The difference at primary level is that the independent learning time is likely to take place within the classroom, under the teacher's supervision. Supervisory teaching also has some similarities to the flipped classroom approach (Bishop & Verleger, 2013), a modern pedagogy that utilises technology particularly for times when students work independently. The flipped classroom explores content that has traditionally been covered by teachers in class via online tutorials that are watched independently from the teacher. This format allows the teacher to then spend class time working with students rather than delivering content, to target them either individually or in small groups and work with them at the level of their need.

### Agency

To have agency is to possess the ability to exercise influence over one's circumstances (Bandura, 2006). Paris and Lung (2008) suggest that as people function in the world they are not merely passive entities directed by the circumstances around them. They can also actively influence and contribute to the realm in which they function. The person who is able to shape the surrounding social structures is said to have agency.

Although agency has been extensively theorised particularly within a sociological context, adaptations of theoretical perspectives to fit educational contexts is a relatively new realm. Naturally this process has given rise to further critique of historical perspectives. For

example, Beista, Preistley, and Robinson (2017) argue for a conceptualisation of agency that is temporal and linked to action in a particular situation. Their perspective is based on the notion that there are many contextual forces that have an impact on human behaviour and a person's ability to act with agency will vary depending on these forces. They argue against agency as a human potential or capacity, drawing on Emirbayer and Mische's (1998) assertion that agency varies widely based on surrounding social structures. For this reason, Beista et al. state that agency can only be considered as action in a given situation. This view contrasts with earlier established theorists such as Bandura (1982; 2001; 2006) and Giddens (1979) who see agency as a human attribute able to be developed and largely transcending life contexts. We have taken the position in this research that agency can, and should, be both a capacity and temporal action. Students can be said to be acting with agency and have agentic capacity.

According to Hewson (2010) there are three key properties of agency—intentionality, power, and rationality. Agentic students have ideas of what they want (intentionality), the ability to make them happen (power), and can think purposefully about the process as they work to achieve their goals (rationality). This description aligns with Bandura's (2001; 2008) definition of the four properties of agency: intentionality, forethought, self-reactiveness, and self-reflection.

Agency is seen by Bandura as a capacity that is exercised, primarily, in three different ways and can be categorised in three modes—individual, social, and by proxy (Bandura, 2001). Individual agency refers to a person's ability to personally enact change in the world around them irrespective of the choices and decisions made by other people or groups of people. Social agency is described as the way people pool skills, knowledge and resources and act together to shape circumstances (Bandura, 2006). Proxy agency is socially mediated agency whereby individuals or groups influence other individuals or groups who have the skills, knowledge and resources to achieve desired outcomes. A blend of these three modes is involved in making up an individual's sense of agency (Bandura, 2006).

### **Student Agency**

Student agency is an emerging focus of primary-school educators (Charteris & Smardon, 2019). Historically, it has been proposed, in various ways, that exercising agency is an existential priority. Dewey, for example, proposed that students must have objectives for their own learning and be free to pursue these (Noddings, 2016). Even long before Dewey, Rousseau (1956) described an ideal education as having the least possible restraints, building learning on the interests of students, with lots of hands-on experience.

More recently, Bandura (2006) argued that developing agency can be seen to be of long-term value because having agency enables individuals to shape the circumstances of their lives. Other theorists support the need to find approaches to teaching and learning that develop deeper agentic attributes in students (e.g., Barker, 2005; Kumpulainen & Lipponen, 2010). Bai (2006) also maintains that the fundamental purpose of education is to develop agency so that one may “enact one's freedom as opposed to conditioned and habituated patterns of thinking, perception, and action” (p. 7). The assessment-orientated culture that surrounds many education systems does not entirely serve this end, or indeed many of our young people's future needs in terms of agency (Reeves, 2008; Stiggins, 2007; Wagner, 2012).

Educators at various levels wrestle with the challenge of knowing what ultimate outcomes and content are vital for students to learn (Dempewolf, 2015). Ritchhart, Church and Morrison (2011) argue for teaching and learning that is not focused on content

knowledge and skills that may or may not be of value in the future. Instead they advocate for the development of broader dispositions, which will set students up for greater success. These dispositions include critical thinking, creative thinking, reflection, and the ability to communicate ideas. Agency can be seen as a worthwhile goal for education because, as a target for educators to work towards, it describes a way of being that empowers students to develop some of the essential dispositions necessary for learning and living effectively.

Accepting the value of agency gives rise to the need for pedagogies that promote it in schools. This study has its roots in the search for an approach that develops an agentic disposition in students from a young age.

### **Developing Student Agency**

The literature points towards certain principles that might guide educators to develop meaningful learning experiences that develop agency. Bandura's (2001, 2006, 2008) and Hewson's (2010) descriptions of the characteristics of agency add definition, and therefore direction, to those interested in understanding how agency might be encouraged. However, Bandura's discussion around the development of agency does not extend to how practising professionals might intentionally develop agency through their practice. Klemencic (2015) confirms this uncertainty saying that students' expression of agency is hugely variable, meaning that manifestations of agency can take many different forms.

Kumpulainen & Lipponen (2010) stress the importance of the learning environment for developing agency. If agency is to be exercised, certain conditions need to be in place (Barab et al., 2009), including a culture where agency is expected both in what students say and what they do. In the classroom, Kumpulainen, Lipponen, Hilppö, & Mikkola (2013) point towards students' sense of agency being developed by small everyday interactions with others rather than significant extraordinary moments.

Bandura (2001) views self-efficacy as vital in establishing agency, which is impacted by context and task-specific beliefs. Self-efficacy is the belief in one's ability to succeed in certain tasks (Bandura, 1982; Ormrod, 2006). Self-efficacy levels are a result of continually evaluating one's abilities within specific areas (Bandura, 1982; Schunk, 1995). Favourable self-evaluations lead to increased confidence, better levels of stress control, and more favourable responses to failure. The effect on agency is significant because the essence of agency is to influence surrounding structures and to do so requires a belief that it can happen.

### **Supervisory Teaching and Agency Development**

In this research project we were primarily concerned with addressing ways that a sense of agency might be fostered in classroom environments in spite of wider contextual forces. The research fulfils Charteris and Smardon's (2019, p. 13) directive that "there could be research into whether there are different ways that students in these different sectors are able to enact curriculum agency". Therefore, this research was primarily concerned with ways students' own agency might be enhanced in particular learning environments. We acknowledge that relational and ecological perspectives have emerged as vital elements in the development of learner agency (Charteris & Smardon, 2018). However, our goal is to better understand those classroom-based dynamics that give rise to agency development in the context of student learning environments.

Supervisory teaching has the potential for episodes of meaningful interaction between teacher and student that in turn have the potential to promote agency growth. The ongoing

interpersonal focus that characterises supervisory teaching aligns with Kumpulainen et al.'s (2013) need for “everyday interaction” that is rich in dialogue. Further to meaningful teacher–student interaction (in Phase One), supervisory teaching also requires students to operate independently from the teacher (in Phase Two), which will likely lead to the development of the students’ own intentions. Therefore, there could be a link between supervisory teaching and agency development.

## Methodology

This research was exploratory, in an area that seems to have been previously unexplored empirically. Exploratory research does not always seek to establish definitive conclusions but rather to elucidate perspectives and deeper understanding that can provide a basis for further more focused research (Shields & Rangarajan, 2013). Accordingly, the methodology chosen was primarily qualitative, utilising the case study method to explore what factors within a supervisory teaching environment, if any, led to agency development. Case study research has been well documented. This study was guided by several prominent case study theorists such as Yin (2014) and Berg (2004), whose Stage Model of Qualitative Analysis was closely utilised.

The case study focused on three primary-school classrooms, their teachers and students, in United International School (pseudonym), a Kindergarten to Grade 12 international school accommodating students five to 18 years old. The school at the time of the research had approximately 850 students across two campuses. Selection of participants was a mix of purposive and random. The participating classrooms were chosen randomly from a pool of possible teacher participants. Teachers in the school were added to a potential list if they were using a supervisory teaching approach in at least one curriculum area. Their names were listed randomly and they were approached, working down the list, one at a time until three teachers were found.

The phenomenon we explored was the development of agency in students through the use by the teachers of a supervisory teaching pedagogy. Information was collected through two specific methods, namely, interviews with teachers and observations within classrooms. Interviews were carried out at two points in the research process: firstly, at the outset and secondly, at the conclusion of the five-month data collection phase, giving six interviews in total. Interviews were audio recorded on a laptop computer and transcribed for analysis. The classroom observations were carried out three times during the five-month data collection period. All three classrooms were implementing a supervisory approach to teaching before the research started. In each classroom one area of the regular programme was observed, that is, one curriculum subject.

Classroom X was a Grade 1 classroom with students who were 6 or 7 years old, taught by Gordon (pseudonym). There were 23 enrolled students in the classroom for the duration of the data collection. Within Classroom X “Exploration Time” became the focus of the research. Although not a traditional subject, Exploration Time was a daily occurrence in Classroom X because of its cross-curricular value.

Classroom Y was a Grade 2 classroom where students were 7 or 8 years old, taught by Kristina (pseudonym). There were 23 students enrolled in this classroom for the duration of the research. The area of focus for the research in Classroom Y was literacy, where the Readers and Writers Workshop was utilised.

The third classroom was a Grade 3 classroom where students were either 8 or 9 years old, taught by Libby (pseudonym). There were 23 students enrolled in this class for the duration of the research. The area that was observed was mathematics. Students would rotate

around learning centres in two-day cycles. During this time, Libby's role was to facilitate a tutorial conversation at one centre while students at the other centres worked independently.

## **Data Analysis**

Data were analysed using an adaption of Berg's (2004) Stage Model of Qualitative Analysis. The process consisted of the following steps:

### ***Step 1—Determine Analytic Categories***

Analytic categories used in this research were Bandura's (2006) four properties of human agency: intentionality, forethought, self-reactiveness, and self-reflection. These properties were considered to be descriptors of agency that would allow for specific identification of instances of agency within the data. The interview transcripts and observation notes were examined and manually coded with each of the four properties of agency being highlighted in an allocated colour. A fifth colour was utilised for multi-category occurrences, that is, examples that included more than one of the analytic categories. The following quote from Gordon is an example of data that was coded using the multi-category:

*One of the biggest obstacles, or one of the biggest challenges, with this type of teaching is control. It is letting go and letting kids decide what they want to learn and how they want to learn it.*

In this example the multicategory was used because there were two separate analytic categories evident—intentionality and forethought.

### ***Step 2—Read Through Data and Establish Thematic Categories***

Multiple readings of the data, as recommended by Berg (2004), allowed thematic categories to emerge from the interview transcripts and observation notes. Once the data had been examined multiple times, individual instances of agency were examined further and emerging themes were recorded. Emerging themes were given names and codes and were tallied (see Table 1). These first identified themes were considered to be thematic categories.

During the first few readings through the data in its entirety, notes were made of themes that were emerging. Following this first step, the frequencies of the themes were tallied. The process of quantifying the frequency of thematic categories was not an exercise in precision but rather an attempt to determine significance. On some occasions a single theme was linked to an instance of agency, while in other instances of agency there were multiple dynamics that were counted as two or three different themes.

### ***Step 3—Determine Systematic Criteria for Sorting Data Chunks Into Categories***

After accumulating, recording, and quantifying the frequency of the various themes, the themes were linked together to create broader themes (key themes).

**Step 4—Relate the Analysis to the Literature on the Subject**

Each theme was further analysed using a narrative display (Cooksey & McDonald, 2011). This stage was not merely for presentation of the findings but also to refine the specific nature of the findings.

**Results**

Overall across the three classes there were 19 themes identified, as summarised in Table 1.

Themes	Classroom X	Classroom Y	Classroom Z	Total
Positive feedback	1	0	1	2
Ownership	15	7	2	24
Independence	16	2	9	27
Playful fun	5	3	7	14
Scaffolding	7	3	2	12
Reflective dialogue	2	10	10	22
Control	1	0	0	1
Problem solving	1	0	1	2
Collaboration	1	0	0	1
Students as teachers	5	1	5	11
Peer-to-peer learning	5	3	3	11
Choice in learning	0	2	2	4
Motivation	0	0	1	1
Confidence	0	0	1	1
Teacher agency	1	0	0	1
Individualised learning	0	0	3	3
Student questioning	2	0	1	3
Sharing experiences	0	0	1	1
Teacher questioning	2	0	1	3

**Table 1: Themes Emerging from Teacher Interviews and Observations Across Classrooms**

**Grouping of Themes**

When looking at the themes it is evident that there is considerable similarity between some themes. For example, independence and ownership in learning have many similarities and in some places it was difficult to decide whether an incident was one or the other. Therefore, the Initial Themes were pooled and summarised into Key Themes, as shown in Table 2. Two of the initial themes did not fit with other themes. They were confidence and teacher agency. As they were both very low-occurring themes ( $n=1$ ), they were excluded from the key themes.

Initial Themes	Key Themes
Independence Ownership Choice in learning Control Problem solving	Independence and ownership of learning
Scaffolding Teacher questioning	Scaffolding
Students as teachers Peer-to-peer learning Collaboration	Students as teachers
Playful fun Motivation	Joyfulness
Reflective dialogue Student questioning Sharing experiences Individualised learning Positive feedback Teacher questioning	Reflection

**Table 2: Initial Themes and Key Themes**

### Key Themes

Five key themes emerged as main categories after following the steps outlined above. These key themes and their posited relationship to agency are described below:

1. *Independence and ownership*—the exercising of agency occurs when there are expectations, opportunities and support for students to act independently and have ownership of their learning.
2. *Scaffolding*—student agency is enabled through a specific type of intervention that overcomes small hitches that prevent students from exercising agency.
3. *Students as teachers*—agency develops as students assume the role of a teacher in learning experiences.
4. *Joyfulness*—exercising agency often occurs concurrently with overt signs of pleasure in the learning process.
5. *Reflection*—exercising the properties of agency can be enhanced by dialogue between teacher and students.

### Discussion

The five key themes or categories that arose from the data are discussed below, with reference to relevant literature.

### **Key Theme 1: Independence and Ownership in Learning**

Ownership of the learning was shared with students, who were allowed to bring their own intentions and ideas to the classroom and thus independently shape the direction of the learning. Firstly and most obviously, learning conversations in Phase One were often shaped by the students' own ideas. Teachers adopted a questioning approach during learning conversations, or 'conferencing', to achieve this goal. The value of student-teacher discourse has been shown to make a positive difference in the teaching and learning process as it can promote higher-order thinking and achievement (Marshall & Smart, 2013; Redfield & Rousseau, 1981; Ritchhart et al., 2011). Our research builds on previous research to show that giving ownership to students through teacher questioning elicits agentic activity in the classroom. The questioning was not sophisticated. Straightforward questions were often used, such as, *What have you been working on?* And, *What are you going to do next?* Students brought forward their own intentions and plans for implementing these intentions as they shaped the learning conversations. They also reflected on what they had done and considered ways they might have done better. This process was described in the classroom observation notes in the following way:

*The child seemed to be stalled and was losing focus on his task. The teacher asked a great question: Where to next? The child just stopped and thought, then proceeded to share about the type of building he would develop next. This isn't the first time I have heard this very simple question asked to good effect. It seems to focus the student.*

There was further expectation for the students to take ownership of their learning in Phase Two, when they were not conferencing with the teacher. There is a need within supervisory teaching for students to be self-managing during the time other students are engaged with the teacher, giving rise to the students having independence and ownership in the classroom. Independent learning in Phase Two provided an opportunity for students to bring forth their ideas and have a voice in the direction that the learning was taking.

Students holding intentions and then acting with control to bring them to pass (Bandura, 2008; Hewson, 2010) is very much the essence of agency. Kumpulainen and Lipponen (2010) support this proposition by showing that students become strongly intentional when given the chance to be authors of their own learning. The emerging idea here is that placing students in a context where they are expected to own the learning is important because students respond by bringing their own intentions to the fore and acting on them.

### **Key Theme 2: Scaffolding—The Unhitching Effect**

One way that supervisory teaching was observed to support agency development was through a type of scaffolding, termed here as *unhitching*—teachers would often support students towards greater agency by unhitching them from factors in their learning that were blocking agency. Hammond and Gibbons (2005) point out that teachers can be effective in freeing students to focus on the learning domain in which they are functioning by removing small but disruptive barriers. In this research students were at various times seen to lack small but vital skills or knowledge that prevented them from moving forward with their intentions in a self-reactive way. Often the hitches were seemingly minor but curtailed the momentum of a task and therefore the ability of the student to exercise agency. The small problem might be a skill they did not have or a key piece of knowledge that was preventing them from using a vital tool.

The unhitching scaffold typically came out of the supervisory conversations between teacher and students, especially when the teacher conducted learning conversations at the students' tables. Calkins, Hartman, and White (2003) advocate learning conversations occurring in the midst of ongoing learning tasks because they give feedback to students as they are in the act of learning.

Gordon explained the simplicity of this dynamic at work when he said:

*I guess when some of the kids are trying to, say for example, build something from the Lego book, some things might be tricky and they might not be able to see how making a connection here or making a connection there might be able to stabilise the structure better. So perhaps giving them the hint means they can continue with what they are doing.*

This research suggests that rather than just adding to what students have done, scaffolding enables agency in students by removing small but significant barriers and allowing students to enter into agentic activity.

### **Key Theme 3: Students as Teachers**

During supervisory teaching students were observed teaching other students. While students who were independently learning were expected to work without the teacher for long intervals, they were seen providing support for each other by taking the role of the teacher. This peer-to-peer support involved students exercising agency in collaboration with others, by instructing others, and by stimulating reflective thought through questioning.

Peer learning, or peer-to-peer learning, has an exhaustive base of empirical discussion (Boud, Cohen, & Sampson, 2001; Topping, 2015). Griffiths, Houston, and Lazenbatt (1995) identify at least 10 different models for peer learning, indicating that the notion of peer learning encompasses a variety of expressions. These models are quite structured in their implementation and imply the need for the teacher's support to become established. However, the peer learning observed in this research was often impromptu and occurred without specific teacher direction.

Mitra (2003) and Mitra and Rana (2001) found that when children were put into an unstructured situation, that is, without significant adult intervention, they were able to learn from each other rapidly. Although others advocate a more structured approach to peer collaboration and learning (Boud, Cohen, & Sampson, 2002), in this research little of the structured type of peer-to-peer teaching was evident in any way related to student agency. The peer learning that led to the apparent rise of agency in the three classrooms occurred within an unstructured environment, that is, an environment with less (but not no) teacher direction.

Students corrected, made suggestions, supported, offered ideas and made evaluative comments on each other's work when learning independently, often leading to reflection and refinement of intentions and plans. The prevalence of these behaviours was very apparent to Gordon who said of the students:

*working independently [from the teachers] they learn how to learn in a more collaborative way. They learn from each other and that some people are good at certain things. To know that those are the people to go to for certain things, and to just be able to share that information ... and for 6- and 7-year-old kids, they love to share what they know.*

Gordon made his statement about "working independently" in reference to the students' learning independently from the teacher. He highlights that when the teacher

facilitates independent learning, students gravitate towards their peers during learning, and some take on the instructional roles of a teacher.

Classroom Z's teacher Libby remarked:

*they understood that they were able to teach one another and be able to combine learning and cooperate and think more deeply about their learning, instead of just being fed something by the teacher and just write down the answer and follow a formula.*

Essentially an unstructured approach to learning that allows for collaboration between peers provides opportunity for more liberty in learning that leads in turn to greater reflection and the potential for self-reactive activity in collaboration with others.

#### **Key Theme 4: Joyfulness**

The data showed that while exercising agency in their learning, students exhibited overt signs of enjoyment, referred to in this research as joyfulness. Three different sub-themes could be seen in the data, namely, playfulness, challenge, and relevant learning.

##### *Playfulness*

The students often had liberty during their independent learning times in Phase Two to exert their own ideas, frequently giving rise to a type of play. This play was not free play where they were able to do anything they wanted; rather, it was a guided play where the students shaped the experience with their own ideas to establish a playful way of learning. We have termed this behaviour 'playful learning' where students have some freedom to shape and reshape significant aspects of the learning experience.

Goodman (1994) and Johnson, Christie, and Wardle (2005) suggest that playful forms of learning, in particular hybrid forms of work and play, are generally good for learning. This view is supported by Fisher, Hirsh-Pasek, Golinkoff, Singer and Berk (2011) who show that a playful approach to learning leads to a greater understanding of content for students. During play children take more control of their learning, leading them to make greater sense of what they are doing. The promotion of control in learning was strongly supported by Piaget (1962), who believed that in play children would take the role of scientists, manipulating the learning conditions and making meaning through becoming an authority in the learning context.

##### *Challenge*

Learning opportunities that were problem-based often led to a joyful disposition in learning, evidence of high engagement and more agentic activity. As with the playful element evident in the research and described above, more prescriptive problem-based tasks were also viewed by the students as enjoyable. The problems or challenges were varied and took on several forms.

The nature of problem-based challenges with an end goal gave impetus to students exercising self-reactive behaviour. Discovering that such a clearly defined task allowed for the development of this property of agency was an interesting result. Early in the research the assumption was that less structure in the learning led to greater agency. This assumption was based on Bourdieu's (1990) assertion that agency and structure are opposed. Although Bourdieu's notion is supported in several other places in this study, it was also observed that

agency developed effectively through semi-structured learning environments and that there can be considerable joyfulness in the learning experience even when the environment is structured, as it was when students were asked to complete various challenges independently.

### *Relevant Learning*

Willis (2007) supported the view that students can achieve higher cognition when they are fuelled by the enjoyment that comes from personally relevant learning experiences. Participation in higher-level thinking is an indication of motivation and engagement, which as discussed above can be indications of agentic behaviour. Fredricks, Blumenfeld, and Paris (2004) provide further backing to the value of learning experiences that are personally relevant by showing the converse, that is, if students do not see the learning as having meaning then they will lose interest and disengage.

Kumpulainen & Lipponen (2010) suggest that learning conversations that validate previous experiences create a higher level of enthusiasm and engagement in learning. Therefore, dialogic interactions with the teacher that occur during tutorial discussions in Phase One are likely to be enjoyable for students when they validate personally meaningful learning from Phase Two. A depth of thought was often visible as students engaged in conversations about learning that were related to relevant experiences from their learning in Phase Two.

The joyfulness came as they exercised their own voice, sharing their intentions, plans, and what they had done. From the research data and analyses it was not possible to conclude whether agency causes joyfulness or vice versa. Sen (1985) showed that there is a correlation between agency and an individual's sense of well-being. Therefore, it might be possible to postulate that joyfulness comes from the ability to exercise agency. Nevertheless, this research only provides evidence that during supervisory teaching, agency often occurs concurrently with a joyful disposition in the learning process.

### **Key Theme 5: Reflection**

Reflection emerged from the data as a theme that gave rise to agency. Self-reflection is critical in learning and growing because it is vital that an individual can think in self-improving ways about how to act more purposefully in the future (Bandura, 2006). Di Stefano, Gino, Pisano, and Staats (2016) highlight the fact that without reflective thought, humans will find it difficult to make meaning of their experiences. In the study personal reflection was achieved in several different ways.

Questioning was used like a mirror causing students to look critically and evaluatively at what they were thinking and doing. All three teachers could be seen to elicit reflective thought from their students by asking well-timed questions that prompted students to think and respond to what they were doing or had done.

Lee and Barnett (1994) aptly refer to questions that promote reflection as “reflective questioning”. They found that quality reflective questions create opportunities for individuals to reflect aloud and to be prompted to expand and extend their thinking. Learning conversations with their dialogic interaction are perfect opportunities to promote this type of reflection.

Supervisory teaching offers two types of opportunities for meaningful reflection—questions during learning conversations, and freedom to think. It is difficult to conclude from this research whether the stimulated reflection during learning conversations with the teacher

led to independent self-reflection during independent learning time. However, it is clear that the opportunity is there to progress from supported agentic thought to independent agentic thinking. Although it is uncertain what caused self-reflective thought to occur, students were self-reflective while learning independently. It is possible that the self-reflection was promoted by the flexibility of the learning environment. That is, the students engaged more freely in self-reflective activity because they had the freedom to do so.

## **Implications for Practising Teachers**

Supervisory teaching is characterised by both personalised learning conversations and independent learning. Both aspects can be seen in this research to link to student agency. There are three main implications from this research for teachers and emerging teachers wishing to enhance student agency in learning.

### **1. Individualised Teacher–Student Learning Conversations have the Potential to Promote Agency**

Teachers interested in developing student agency should explore the potential of individualised learning conversations. These are short episodes of intense dialogical exploration between teacher and student. If teachers are intentional with their language, students can be encouraged to contribute their own ideas to learning conversations. As students express their own ideas they not only self-reflect on what they are discussing but are permitted to share their own ideas and plans about the direction that the learning is taking. A key act of teaching that was seen to support student agency was questioning. Hewson (2010) emphasises the importance of power in being agentic. Appropriate questioning empowers students in the learning process by promoting reflective thought. Examples of this dynamic can be seen in the way that Gordon often asked, “What are you working on?” or the way Kristina asked, “What are you working on as a writer?”. The value of guiding students to be more active through questioning was captured by Gordon who said:

*I often tell them [students] that if I tell you the answer you won't remember, but if you found the answer yourself you would remember it for the rest of your life. It definitely encourages independent learning.*

However, individualised learning conversations are not just about teacher questioning. These conversations help teachers make room for direct instruction too. As Libby said:

*... yeah in that sense I can see where the students are and give direct and specific feedback to them, work with them, and help them. And it takes less time to help individual students because I know exactly what they need help with, I'm not going over the whole lesson with the class again.*

Often in this research it was observed that students needed a key piece of knowledge to continue pursuing an agentic direction in their learning. Individualised learning conversations can promote the opportunity for teachers to provide this knowledge.

### **2. Letting Students Have Control of Learning Direction can Lead to Agentic Outcomes**

When teaching for agency it is important for teachers to shape the learning environment in a way that actively encourages students to have ownership. For most primary-school teachers, this shaping of the learning environment will at first occur in one subject rather than throughout the day, perhaps through contract work or learning centres. In this research, this

shaping involved students either choosing what types of tasks they wanted to complete or, if tasks were more prescriptive, being allowed to make choices and have ownership over the direction of the tasks. Teachers and emerging teachers should be mindful of the fact that these are two ways they can give students opportunity to exercise agency in their learning. The simple act of choice encourages independence and ownership, which in turn encourages intentionality, reflection and possibly joyfulness. When working together during their independent learning time, students were observed to work collaboratively. In this research, one example of collaboration, independence and ownership, intentionality and joyfulness was when a group of students chose a game from several options provided by the teacher but asserted their own ideas by modifying the rules.

### **3. Find Enjoyment in Learning From both Playfulness and Challenging Experiences**

This research indicates that enjoyment in the learning experience is closely linked to student agency. Students were seen joyfully engaged in their learning while at the same time exhibiting agentic properties. The enjoyment that is linked to greater student agency was facilitated through two key mechanisms—playfulness and challenging experiences.

Teachers should look for ways they can allow students to let their learning take on an element of playfulness. Play can take on different forms and may include more structured games or less structured imaginative experiences such as making something. The other way that students found a sense of joyfulness in their learning was through problem-based challenges that have an end goal to focus on. Students appeared motivated by solving problems and derived satisfaction from mastering a task. As with one student with ADHD who was engaged in a tangram puzzle, it was the enticement of the challenge to complete the task that appeared to provide the focus and enjoyment in the learning that often led to agentic learning in this case study. This notion is supported by Paris and Paris (2010) who show that problem-based learning promotes greater self-regulation and results in more engagement and motivation in learning, both concepts linked to the notion of student agency.

## **Conclusion**

Supervisory teaching is an ancient and straightforward approach to teaching and learning that prioritises two key pedagogical elements—tutorial learning conversations, and independent learning and inquiry. Student agency is an emerging priority in various educational contexts and is a worthwhile goal for our educational endeavours. Three primary-school classrooms in an international school were examined over a six-month period to explore the impact that a supervisory teaching pedagogy has on agency development. Student agency was observed to develop, and five factors were identified as important: independence and ownership in learning, scaffolding/unhitching, students as teachers, joyfulness and reflection. The main conclusion of the study, therefore, is that supervisory teaching shows promise as a pedagogical approach to encourage the development of student agency.

A specific conclusion from the research is the value of learning that occurs away from the face-to-face interaction with the teacher, even with very young students. The value of this independent learning was not foreseen at the start of the research. The independent learning observed in Phase Two was not merely preparation for the face-to-face discussion or dialogic learning in Phase One. Rather, it stood alone as a means of encouraging agency development.

Related to this independent learning was the level of structure in each classroom. More agentic behaviours were observed in the classrooms with less structure. A relationship

between level of structure and the development of agency cannot be concluded from this research but suggests a promising area for further research.

Phase One discussions are also influential in promoting student agency, primarily through the judicious use of questioning aimed at eliciting students' own ideas and actions. Such questioning naturally encourages student self-reflection, intentionality (what they plan to do next) and forethought (how they might implement their plan). Further studies investigating the intentional inclusion of tutorial discussions in classrooms would enhance understanding of the role of such dialogue in promoting agency.

Collaboration seemed to promote agency development. It was clear that students learnt from each other and were supported by their peers in the learning process, as they exercised agency together and on behalf of one another. Owing to the teacher's role in the classroom facilitating tutorial discussions, students were required to be independent, and to seek help from each other or work together to complete particular activities. An investigation of the role of collaboration between peers in student agency development would be a useful addition to the literature on collaborative learning as well as on agency.

Owing to the small-scale nature of the study, these conclusions need further investigation before they can be proclaimed as ways of developing student agency. The study does suggest, however, that the principles of this pedagogical approach, that is, supervisory teaching, should be examined by educators interested in teaching for greater student agency.

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