Review of Student Agency in the Classroom: Honoring Student Voice in the Curriculum

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BOOK REVIEW

STUDENT AGENCY IN THE CLASSROOM

Review of *Student Agency in the Classroom: Honoring Student Voice in the Curriculum*

*By Margaret Vaughn*

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Following a forward written by Anne Haas Dyson, who reminds readers that children are often situated as “passive receivers of knowledge” (p. ix), Margaret Vaughn begins the introduction of *Student Agency in the Classroom: Honoring Student Voice in the Curriculum* defining agency as “students desires, ability, and power to determine their own course of action” (p. 1). This definition advances Dyson’s reminder and prepares the reader for nine (9) chapters divided into two parts. The first part, Locating Student Agency, takes the reader through the inner and outer dimensions of student agency and how these dimensions are inter and intra-connected. The second part, Growing Student Agency, zeros in on teacher praxis (Freire, 1972) that propels or repels student agency in the classroom while considering the barriers to achieving teacher agency alongside student agency. The following paragraphs provide an overview and analysis of each chapter of the book, paired with a critique—mostly questions—intended for deeper reflection as educators work toward advancing agency for all students.

What is student agency? (Chapter 1) offers definitions of student agency from scholars before landing on “the ability to think unconventionally, question the herd, imagine new scenarios and produce astonishing work” (Wan & Gut, 2011, p. 10; Vaughn, 2021, p. 13). The goal of student agency is for students to influence their world and the world around them by defining and acting on their own goals. Many schools tout student agency as a primary goal for their students; however, as the chapter continues, barriers to doing student agency work in the classroom reveal themselves. Standardization, pacing guides, and directed instruction are identified as impediments to teachers achieving agency in the classroom, as few opportunities are available for students to take the lead in their learning. Teachers are often discouraged from veering off prescribed curriculum to cultivate agency in the classroom by their superiors.

Further, teachers are often unable to differentiate students acting on their agency from students being rude, disrespectful, or disobedient. It should not be lost on educators that such shortcomings result in more troubling outcomes for Black and Brown students in the classroom (Love, 2023). What would teachers need to do to recognize such shortcomings in their interactions with Black and Brown students in their classrooms? What would curriculum leaders at the building and district level need to do differently to disrupt standardization that generates harm for Black and Brown students?

Vaughn posits that there are three inner-dimensional categories to consider when working to understand or cultivate student agency: dispositional (the extent to which students possess purpose and intentions), motivation (students’ perception and their beliefs about whether they can persist to complete desired actions), and positional (the ways students participate, negotiate, and interact in groups, communities, and organizations). Vaughn argues that student dispositions,
motivations, and positionality coalesce within classrooms and schools, forming student (dis)beliefs about their agency. Teachers play a significant role here, as their ability to notice and respond to agency becomes critical in propelling or repelling student agency development.

The book goes deeper into the three inner dimensions of student agency. *Purpose and Intentionality* (Chapter 2) provides more context into student dispositionality. Having agency begins with a clear understanding of our individual dispositions (and our ability to adapt when we learn new information). How students use and apply knowledge drives their purpose and intentionality and how they navigate complex social environments created and sustained by adults in their lives. Without purpose, it is impossible to achieve agency, making navigating social environments difficult and, for some students, even dangerous.

Building on Vaughn’s ideas, educators should question what and whose purpose and intentionality have been lauded in educative spaces. Relying on students’ cultural wealth and backgrounds is one way to disrupt traditional notions of purpose (Yosso, 2005). Often, community-based purpose and school-based purpose are misaligned, resulting in harmful outcomes for students who have been marginalized consistently by schools. Further, if agency is about taking control of our lives and influencing the outcomes of the world around us, outcomes for traditionally marginalized students would look differently. For instance, Black and Brown students often demonstrate their agency in classrooms and are met with punishment, leading to exclusionary practices (USAFacts, 2021). If we are to posit that students should act upon their agency in the classroom, we must acknowledge the real ways that teacher dispositions and anti-Blackness (Dumas, 2016; Lopez & Jean-Marie, 2021) manifest in classrooms that impede Black children’s ability to do so. Intentionality is essential, and impact is more important. Educators should spend time contending with the impacts of their intentions on Black and Brown students.

Transitioning to student motivation, *Perception and Persistence* (Chapter 3) are elements of the inner dimensions of student agency that are critical to student motivation. Vaughn writes that students’ “perceptions of the activities they are asked to do, and their ability to reshape activities to make them more relevant to their interests, informs how the role of perceptions is instrumental in the development of student agency” (p. 37). Stated another way, students need to view tasks as beneficial and understand the immediate application of said tasks in their lives. What happens, however, when students do not see the value of the task? Are students free to change their assignments’ trajectories if teachers adhere to standardization that foregrounds mandated testing? Could this be an assumption that schools automatically support student agency?

Vaughn posits that tasks must possess “interest value, attainment value, and utility value” (p. 39), and students must believe they can complete the task. Deficit ideologies, though, of Black and Brown students held by teachers prohibit student achievement (Solorzano & Yosso, 2001). Do teachers believe that students can complete the task, as well?

Perception pairs with persistence, which Vaughn defined as “the ability for individuals to steadily maintain effort and engage in an action or complete a task” (p. 39). Students believing that they can complete tasks fuels their persistence as each dimension of student agency is inter and intra-connected. As the chapter continues, Vaughn reminds the reader of the ways that Black and Brown students, students living in poverty, and students who have learned English as a
second or third language have been structurally denied agency in schools as their cultural wealth and community values to do not align with schools (Yosso, 2005). While students are often structured not to persist in school’s pre-set conditions, Black and Brown students continue showing up despite evidence that school practices do not work for them, their families, or their communities. With this, I posit that Black and Brown students are models for persistence or grit, not in need of interventions that support persistence or grit. How do we structurally change and reimagine schools so that the current socio-political landscape embedded in schools is disrupted for and by students? If teachers play a critical role at every step of student agency development, then teachers will only be able to meet students to the degree that they have met themselves and engaged in their own agentic development.

Students (and their families) are constantly negotiating how they will interact within schools, and such negotiations are situated around perceived rewards and punishments (Reynolds, 2015). Further, students negotiating is less about whether they will be rewarded or punished and more about determining the degree of reward or punishment. Interaction and Negotiation (Chapter 4) provide insight into the final dimension of student agency–positionality–closing out part one (1) of the book. According to Vaughn, “teachers and peers can facilitate agency or impede students in their efforts to develop their agency” (p. 47). Student interactions across the classroom and within the broader school environment expand or retract opportunities for students to develop their agency through access to unique opportunities. Again, how students are positioned determines the level of interactions that are structurally possible for them to engage in. In this sense, in what ways can school agents weaponize agency and agency development, controlling the types of interactions we believe students deserve? Educators are developing or stifling agency all the time.

Inherently, student negotiation is required across classrooms and educational spaces broadly. Negotiation is determined by how much power students have within classrooms and schools. Within various aspects of educational research, there are countless examples of exclusionary practices for Black and Brown students, including over-representation in suspensions, expulsions, and other punitive measures (U.S. Department of Education, Office for Civil Rights, 2014) and a lack of access to advanced placement curricula (Education Trust, 2020). Further, we see over-representation in special education (Annamma et al., 2020) as well as barriers to participating in extracurricular activities in under-resourced schools (Park & Kim, 2023). Given this non-exhaustive list of exclusionary practices, how could power be structurally stripped away from Black and Brown students in schools and classrooms? If students are removed from school, limited in their curricular choices, and not engaged inside and outside of classroom activities, how could schools be deeming students powerless? If educators and policymakers prescribe school, how could students ever have the power to negotiate to be agentic? Finally, if teachers are not agentic and do not take opportunities to practice, how could agency be taught to students? What risks would educators need to take to work towards agency in their praxis? One potential pathway to a co-constructed agency in the classroom is youth-led participatory action research (YPAR) (Buttimer, 2018; Kohfeldt et al., 2016; Mirra et al., 2015; Scorza et al., 2017), where students and teachers act as co-researchers to investigate topics that create change in their lives. Agency and YPAR pair well together, and the youth-led emphasis of YPAR serves as a reminder that the work is to be directed by students.
As the book transitions to Part II: Growing Student Agency, *How Students Experience and Talk About Agency* (Chapter 5) and *How Teachers Implement and Talk About Agency* (Chapter 6) presents direct quotations and analysis from Vaughn’s student agency research to demonstrate the deep understandings of how students experience school. Listening to students in all ways they can communicate is foundational to achieving student agency, which should serve as a roadmap to change in their school experiences. Perspectives from students provide insight into the possibilities of, barriers to, and pathways toward achieving student agency in classrooms and schools overall. Vaughn shares that, in alignment with students, teachers felt that cultivating student agency is critical for student learning and development.

Although students and teachers agreed that agency was important, Vaughn writes that students overwhelmingly expressed limited opportunities for them to act on their agency and be positioned as “knowledgeable decision-makers” (p. 64). More emphasis on relationship-building between students and teachers is needed (Howard et al., 2020). Building on this notion of relationships, for teachers to truly endeavor toward student agency, a choice will need to be made to determine the degree to which agency is desired in classrooms. And, further, educators must ask themselves if voice truly does lead to agency, particularly and especially under predetermined guidelines and metrics for success. Could students pointing out a lack of opportunities for cultivating their agency also be about how schools systemically and structurally silence their voices? To be precise, students have voices, educators do not take voices away but rather silence student voices. Educators need to decide on agency versus voice. If schools reproduce society, and most everyone goes to school, could a critical approach to student agency development look like challenging schools and schooling practices? Student agency in the classroom is challenging schools as students should be positioned as thought partners in their learning.

While student agency cannot be standardized, teachers are plagued with standardizing learning in the classroom to meet the demands of high-stakes and inequitable testing. Most critical in these chapters of the book is the need for teachers to be clear on the differences between student voice and student agency in their pedagogical choices. This process involves actually listening to students and embracing freedom, but what does freedom in the classroom look like? How do we move students and teachers from simply being heard to deciding on what and how they learn and teach on their own? Is it possible for classrooms to truly be agentic spaces if teachers are adhering to standardization?

More emphasis should be placed on relationship building in schools between teachers and students. On page 75, direct quotes demonstrate that teachers are unclear on the difference between voice and agency. Vaughn goes on to describe “the parallel between students’ perspectives about student agency as representing an avenue to share their voice and to make choices, and the teachers' perspectives on the necessity of student voice and choice in conceptualizing a view of student agency.” It is imperative to emphasize that students' conceptualizations of agency and voice are directly linked to adult conceptualizations that yield pedagogy, policy, and practice in schools. Students are only able to “meet” at voice because that is where the teachers' conceptualizations land. This contributes to why students have “minimal opportunities where they made choices and shared their voice,” as indicated on page 66.
Teachers and other school personnel have not defined or conceptualized an agentic schooling experience for students.

Student voice can be a starting point for cultivating student agency. Still, it is not enough for students to realize their full potential as it relies too heavily on teachers' dispositions, which may not be agency oriented. Teachers must be specific about the degrees to which they want to cultivate agency and determine if the end goal is cultivating agency at all. Further, how does agency reach outside of the classroom? Does student agency extend to all levels of the school? Why or why not? How teachers implement and talk about agency in the classroom heavily depends on how student agency is discussed outside the classroom. If limits are placed on agency, is it agency at all?

Vaughn advances four (4) approaches to Teaching for Student Agency (Chapter 7) (pg. 86-88):

1. Teachers should be alert to students’ readiness to assert themselves, guide their own learning, and make their own choices.
2. Teachers should reflect on their own classroom structures, materials, and assignments to make sure they allow students to assert agency.
3. Teachers should err on the side of giving students too much choice and freedom. And if students aren’t ready for it, then teachers should scale it back (rather than giving up on it entirely).
4. Teachers should be particularly aware of the dialogue and language they use to support students’ agentic paths.

Each of these approaches requires relationship building between students and teachers to maintain a classroom community of learners. In a true community, students and teachers are free to make choices (and mistakes) about learning that matter and are relevant to their specific needs at the time—needs that change constantly. Students and teachers can achieve agency with the freedom to decide, challenge, contribute, and reflect. Further, teachers should be adaptive (or reflexive) in their teaching approaches when specific pedagogical approaches do not work for students in their classes. This is not a moment for students to change but for the teacher to change. Vaughn posits that teachers must strike a balance between “how much control they need to reserve for themselves and how much autonomy they can realistically hand over to their students” (p. 86). In what ways could this “balance” be the root cause of less agentic students in classrooms in schools? Can control, in any form and level, ever truly lead to cultivated agency? Cultivating a Culture of Agency (Chapter 8) further explores this idea.

School communities must constantly adapt to exact student agency—an adaptation schools are resistant to. A “culture of agency” requires a symbiotic relationship between teachers, students, and principals, which means that each group carries the same amount of effort. Giving and taking agency is problematic as students, teachers, and principals must believe that everyone inherently is agentic and that agency is stifled, not absent. Positioning agency as something to be earned, given, or taken away runs counter to achieving agency. In Chapter 8, Vaughn provides specific insights into what characteristics teachers should possess, what students should do to realize their full agentic potential, and what principals should do for effective school leadership that cultivates agency. For teachers and principals, specifically, their agentic development efforts
must include a frequent and exhaustive interrogation of their school climate and culture, which may strongly run counter to students achieving agency (or even voice) as a goal. Teacher and administrator beliefs about students and families guide our praxis.

Taking A Look to the Future (Chapter 9), Vaughn closes the book with a charge to students, teacher-educators, professional developers, administrators, policymakers, scholars, and researchers. What would the future of student agency in schools look like if educators considered classrooms transgressive spaces for resistance to further harm and marginalization that stifles agency (hooks, 1994)? Classrooms are critical spaces to examine human conditions to recreate and reimagine a world we all want to live in–where everyone can thrive (Love, 2019). What would happen in schools if we began to see a lack of agency as inhuman?

Ending where the book began with the definition of agency as “students desires, ability, and power to determine their own course of action” (p. 1), educators must interrogate how we mediate desire, determine ability, and leverage power over students for control and compliance—not agency. Student agency in the classroom can only be achieved to the degree that teachers have achieved and conceptualized their own agency. Future iterations of this work should make distinctions between voice, which is transactional, and agency, which is transformative for all community members to move from honoring student voice in the curriculum to honoring student agency in the curriculum.

Author Notes

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