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Cultivating student agency through teachers’ professional learning

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ABSTRACT
Thoughtfully planned professional development (PD) that fosters teacher agency has the potential to impact student agency in the literacy classroom. Drawing on a body of research with 82 teachers across multiple schools and clinical settings, this article first presents findings from a variety of PD contexts that are synthesized to highlight four guiding principles for designing professional learning that encourages both teacher and student agency. Then, the article illustrates one vignette of agentive literacy teaching, which was subsequently facilitative of students’ agentic engagement with vocabulary learning. Throughout, the case is made that intentional and embedded opportunities for co-construction of knowledge and reciprocity between PD providers and teachers, teachers and leadership, and teachers and students are important ingredients for an agentic learning experience. Finally, conclusions are drawn emphasizing that teacher and student agency are forces of empowerment, critical to student and teacher well-being.

Thus, by choosing and shaping their environments, people can have a hand in what they become.

—Bandura (2001, p. 11)

For at least 3 decades, literacy reform efforts and professional development (PD) in schools have focused on refining teachers’ instructional practices to raise student achievement (Woulfin & Rigby, 2017). Consequently, policy mandates at the local, state, and federal levels have appropriated substantial monies for PD (Woulfin & Rigby, 2017). Much of this PD has been “traditional” whereby teachers attend 1-time workshops with minimal or no follow-up led by PD providers with limited knowledge of teachers’ unique instructional contexts (Darling-Hammond, Wei, Andree, Richardson, & Orphanos, 2009). Despite its prevalence, traditional PD rarely leads to meaningful change in teachers’ practice or student achievement. Researchers (e.g., Darling-Hammond et al., 2009) hypothesize that traditional PD is ineffective because it is not connected to teachers’ immediate concerns about curriculum and learning. Moreover, traditional PD positions teachers as passive learners leaving little room for teacher decision-making (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2006). In turn, it undermines the extent to which teachers are seen as professionals with valuable expertise (Hoffman, Martinez, & Danielson, 2016).

In contrast, we describe an agentic approach to PD (see Figure 1) where all educators act individually and intentionally to promote student learning; yet, they also work in
iterative and interdependent ways to foster collective agency (i.e., the arrows directed toward the center circle). Thus, the social and contextual factors (e.g., collective goals and relatedness) in which the groups are interacting facilitate intrinsic motivation through increased autonomy and self-efficacy. With all groups contributing to the collective sense of agency, the assumption is that teachers will practice what they experience in PD, and also that PD cultivates student agency. We argue that cultivating agentive students is predicated on teachers who are likewise agentive, who approach teaching less as enacting prescribed curricula and more as developing professional knowledge about literacy balanced with the knowledge of students in context.

To illustrate our argument, we first briefly review the literature on agentic teaching and learning. Then, we identify 4 elements of professional learning describing how each cultivates agency in both teachers and students. Next, we present a classroom vignette to highlight connections between teacher and student agency. We conclude by arguing for PD that empowers teachers and students alike.

**An agentic perspective toward teaching and learning**

Bandura (2001) wrote, “To be an agent is to intentionally make things happen by one’s actions” (p. 2). Agentive teachers iteratively use their knowledge, experiences, and theories of learning to actively create, critique, and adapt curricula (Wilkinson, 2005). They intentionally adopt, reject, or initiate instructional practices to support student learning (Paris & Lung, 2008). Agentic approaches to teaching and learning assume that teachers are unique, that strengths and experiences should be respected, and that knowledge is socially constructed (Vygotsky, 1978).

Likewise, students possess unique strengths and experiences; they are capable of engaging agentively in their learning (Ivey & Johnston, 2013). Teachers’ instructional decisions

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**Figure 1.** An agentic approach to professional learning.
play a role in determining students’ opportunities to engage constructively with others and with content. Students can be viewed as consumers of knowledge and followers, or they can be viewed as empowered thinkers who take initiative in their learning and do so purposefully. We argue for the latter, and we conceptualize empowered thinkers as those who are agentive, engaged, knowledge-driven, and strategic (Robertson, Dougherty, Ford-Connors, & Paratore, 2014).

Empowered thinkers approach learning tasks in planful, thoughtful ways to meet their learning goals. They are intrinsically motivated and interested in the content they are studying. Moreover, they exhibit self-efficacy that sustains their persistence in learning, even when tasks prove difficult (Bandura, 2001).

**What is an agentic approach to professional learning?**

As the opening quote suggests, we ascribe to a PD approach that forefronts agency in both the processes and the outcomes of teachers’ professional learning, with the ultimate goal of promoting teachers’ and students’ choice and voice. Agency, in this sense, occurs when people act in reflective, autonomous, and intentional ways based on personal and professional convictions of what is right (Bandura, 2001; Paris & Lung, 2008). Thus, in our PD and research projects, we seek to interact with teachers in ways that promote teacher agency; agentive teachers act on student-focused needs and interests, make judgments about students’ capabilities, anticipate potential student difficulties, and regulate their actions accordingly (Paris & Lung, 2008).

Self-determination theory posits that people are innately curious and have a desire to grow (Deci & Ryan, 1995). Moreover, there are both extrinsic and intrinsic motivations at play in this process. Interactions can either facilitate or undermine people’s sense of initiative, well-being, and quality of performance. This suggests that cultivating sustainable professional learning is predicated on 3 fundamental psychological needs: autonomy (i.e., ability to have their choices be determinants of actions), competence (i.e., a belief about effectiveness), and relatedness (i.e., having a sense of belonging) (Deci & Ryan, 1995). When the PD context permits satisfaction of these 3 needs, teachers’ perceptions of self-worth are facilitated.

Within productive PD social contexts, all actors (i.e., PD providers, teachers, and ultimately, students) are individual agents who bring their unique experiences and knowledge to the collective group to construct meaning (Vygotsky, 1978). In such contexts, individual autonomous actions and competencies come together in recursive ways to foster collective agency (Bandura, 2001) related to larger school goals. All parties hold shared commitments to iterative and interdependent planning and action (Figure 1). As such, teachers internalize socially sanctioned activities in order to feel autonomous, competent, and related to others (Deci & Ryan, 1995).

These same principles of autonomy, competence, and relatedness are also fundamental to student agency. When teachers engage in PD that promotes teacher agency, their sense of agency can be harnessed in the service of increased student agency. That is, teachers’ instructional actions can provide opportunities for student contributions and choices in the content and processes of learning (Vaughn, 2014).
Elements of an agentic approach to professional learning

Our agentic PD research (Brock, Robertson, Borti, & Gillis, 2019; Robertson, Padesky, Thrailkill, Kelly, & Brock, 2019b) in schools and our university clinic (Robertson, Ford-Connors, Frahm, Bock, & Paratore, 2019a; Robertson & Padesky, 2019) has examined how we work with teachers to co-construct not only their knowledge of literacy instruction, but also the structures and activities of PD. This agentic approach, drawn from our PD and research with more than 80 teachers across multiple contexts, is built on essential elements of effective PD (Darling-Hammond et al., 2009). Combined, these elements include:

- **leadership** that privileges teachers’ co-construction and application of new knowledge from the outset
- **autonomy** in designing PD reciprocally with teachers and situating learning in teachers’ actual classrooms
- **intentionality** and coherence across multiple PD sessions
- **reflectivity** that is consistently focused on student learning of context-embedded curriculum goals

Each element is described in turn.

**Leadership**

Strong leaders play an essential role in the extent to which teachers integrate literacy PD learning into everyday classroom instruction (Taylor, Raphael, & Au, 2011). When leaders (i.e., administrators, coaches, teacher leaders) embrace an agentic perspective (Figure 1) that honors diverse approaches to PD implementation from classroom to classroom, it is more likely that everyone will collectively and iteratively work toward common literacy instructional goals.

A lack of collective agency is the difference between a leadership approach and a managerial approach. In the former, power is distributed across principal and teachers, facilitating a sense of collective agency (e.g., “buy-in”) that facilitates the process of teachers working toward a common goal. In the latter approach, different voices vie for power in developing a singular goal; this singularity inhibits the development of collective agency, leading to a scattered PD focus and an inability to celebrate diverse approaches to common instructional goals. Instead, there exists confusion about who is “right” in the process of PD, which undermines agency.

For example, the principal in one elementary school (Robertson et al., 2019b) we worked with approached his role in the PD partnership as a leader, as opposed to a manager. He used his position to set organizational direction, develop teacher professional learning, and distribute leadership amongst the faculty. The establishment and effective functioning of an English Language Arts Goal Team played a pivotal role in this distributed leadership. Within this framework, the principal identified two teachers who welcomed the opportunity to take lead roles in facilitating the team meetings; he provided space and opportunity for them to co-construct knowledge with their fellow teachers and make decisions with us as external PD providers. These two teacher leaders were identified for their abilities to facilitate group conversations, as well as their
dispositions toward inquiry, self-reflection, and professional learning. Throughout his leadership decision-making process, the principal actively co-constructed with the teachers a shared vision for the overarching PD experience; thus, his shared leadership promoted agentic teacher involvement with PD development.

In another elementary school (Robertson et al., 2019b), the principal and teacher leaders on the designated leadership team struggled to cultivate a sustainable PD context. Each month, teacher leaders had different ideas of where the school needed work. Although the decisions were coming from teachers, the group of teachers and the principal—who often seemed to be managing more than leading the professional learning—were not clearly defining organizational direction. There was no consensus on an overarching literacy-related learning goal for the school. Further, communication with us from the administration and teacher leaders was fraught with challenges. When we tried to press for focus and came to a consensus in a meeting, decisions were then made outside of the PD meetings that took the school in other directions before the next meeting, undermining the professional PD process. In this school, while some individuals seemed to act agentively, a sense of collective agency focused on a clear goal was missing.

**Autonomy**

Autonomy is evident when we, as PD facilitators, strive to work with partners in ways that promote their independence, self-sufficiency, and self-worth. To illustrate this point: in one 3-year PD project with a non-governmental organization (NGO), we found that early in our collaboration, our university team was perceived as the “experts”. As the year progressed, though, we and the NGO leaders became viable collaborative partners working together to promote teacher and student learning. By the end of year 1, a more comfortable, collaborative relationship developed as the 2 separate groups became a more united team wherein all participants demonstrated increased engagement by openly questioning themselves and others related to instructional decision-making (Brock et al., 2019). Now in year 3, one NGO leader (a) chose the focus of the PD session for her staff, (b) developed the bulk of the activities for the session, and (c) sought help/support from us, as external support, for the portions of the activities that she deemed merited our expertise. As the NGO leader made these decisions, she and the teachers collaboratively chose the PD focus and developed purposeful activities based on teachers’ perceived needs of their own learning and that of their students.

**Intentionality**

Coupled with autonomy comes intentionality in decision-making. Intentionality is defined as teachers initiating thoughtful and purposeful action on behalf of goals that have value to them as professionals and to their students (e.g., Paris & Lung, 2008). As PD collaborators, we are intentional in how we approach and plan for PD opportunities. Structurally, we work collaboratively with teachers and administrators to determine which types of learning opportunities (e.g., discussions, lectures, resource use, modeling), and in which order, would best serve teachers’ learning needs. In doing so, we also intentionally introduce professional learning opportunities that offer teachers “choice and voice” in how they approach their instruction. That is, we intentionally promote
knowledge of multiple instructional practices on a related topic rather than offering ready-made lessons. Moreover, through this process, we provide opportunities to explore these teaching approaches within particular literacy domains in ways that promote agency amongst students (e.g., helping teachers see the power of choice and self-directed learning for their students).

The PD process itself does not cause teachers and students to be more agentive; rather, it helps to promote a professional learning culture where agency is valued as part of the learning process. Based in this approach, teachers at one elementary school reported that, for example, they are “so much more attuned to words [i.e., vocabulary], and we are using them in our talk and writing;” and, “I am finding that I have become so much more intentional in how I am talking.” During the end-of-year focus groups, teachers noted that students are “using the words and excited to share…. [learning is] so much more real and relevant to them now.” This was attributed to the “[multiple] ways words were picked” with many different contexts for vocabulary learning (Robertson et al., 2019b).

Reflectivity

Finally, reflectivity refers to the careful analysis and critique of our conceptual lenses through which we view the world and act in it (Mortari, 2015). We strive to build reflectivity structurally into our PD work in 2 ways. First, we establish an iterative process whereby we (a) meet with a leadership team to co-plan context-specific PD, (b) collaboratively enact the PD, and (c) meet with the leadership team again after the PD meeting to analyze and critique effectiveness (Brock et al., 2019). As part of this process, the leadership team brings the co-planned ideas back to the teachers for input before enacting the PD. Then, leaders also reflect with the teachers about PD effectiveness and bring those ideas back to the next leadership team meeting.

Self- and other critique is one aspect of our school-university leadership team meetings and clinic coaching. We engage in self- and other critique by commenting on what we felt “worked” and “didn’t work” relative to our unique contributions to the PD (Robertson et al., 2019a). We also seek input from our partners about their perceptions of our contributions. Thus, we analyze and critique ourselves and seek the analysis and critique of others. One of the teacher leaders in a partner school described our collaborative, reflective leadership process as a “continuous feedback loop” (Robertson et al., 2019b).

Teacher reflectivity is also built into our structural reflectivity process. First, individual teachers choose aspects with which they want to experiment within the overarching topical frame of the PD (e.g., informational reading, vocabulary, small-group reading instruction). Then, they “try on” various ideas in their classrooms and reflect with colleagues in grade-level teams, meetings of the whole faculty, and distance-based coaching. Finally, at follow-up whole group PD meetings (e.g., leadership team meetings), teachers discuss with the broader group what worked and didn’t work with an eye toward continually improving instructional practices to foster student learning and agency.

For example, kindergarten teachers in one elementary school (Robertson et al., 2019b) wanted to develop their abilities to bring more robust oral language and vocabulary development into their read alouds, where teachers and students were making choices about the selection of words discussed. They selected a relevant professional article to read and then co-planned lessons. Through subsequent grade-level discussions, they felt they
needed further support from us as PD providers to model a lesson. We discussed their reflective comments through an online communication document. Then, we planned a modeled lesson on our next visit, which all the teachers observed and debriefed with us in a follow-up meeting. In the subsequent weeks, the teachers then continued to refine their read-aloud instruction and share their reflections with us through the online communication document.

A look at agency in action

In what follows, we share a vignette of agentive teaching wherein student agency toward word learning was fostered (Robertson et al., 2019b). Rather than evidence of a “teacher-proof” lesson externally created by us or a curricular resource, notice how this vignette shows a teacher successfully melding her PD experiences with her existing knowledge and experience as they relate to her students, with an emphasis on increasing students’ ownership and choice. Her prior PD included discussions of self-selected, vocabulary-related articles and books with colleagues, modeled and/or co-planned lessons we provided at teachers’ invitation, leadership team meetings that helped set the direction for the PD, and faculty meetings among the teachers focused on sharing what is working and not as teachers try out new ideas. The vignette details an observed vocabulary lesson and debriefing session between Natalie (a pseudonym) and Lauren (second author).

Natalie’s third-grade classroom

As a teacher leader in the school, Natalie was an active participant in PD, collaborating with both her grade-level teachers and the school at large to facilitate teacher learning. In her third-grade classroom, Natalie had been experimenting with word walls, while also navigating the challenge of promoting her students’ voice in vocabulary learning. Moreover, she was grappling with valid worries about students (mis)learning to engage in surface reading to develop extensive, meaningless vocabulary “lists”. To facilitate more meaningful independence in student vocabulary learning, Natalie turned to modeled lessons with us, as well as to her teacher team, where they studied self-selected research literature to gather ideas for student-led word learning. In this teacher- and student-centered professional learning, Natalie was able to bring forth a teaching concept, Graffiti Walls (Gallagher & Anderson, 2016), that she found. Then, she invited us into her classroom to see what she had learned.

A large construction paper tree trunk is topped with snaking paper branches, paper leaves with handwritten words lining the limbs. The tree is almost full, and Natalie shows Lauren a sandwich bag stuffed with leaves that have been posted and taken down as units in science, social studies, math, and literacy have come to a close. Natalie shares how she addresses a common conundrum in the classroom: “What do you do when you run out of wall space for all of the learning that happens during the year?” To solve this space issue, Natalie has her students maintain vocabulary notebooks, where whole class focal words are recorded, alongside words discussed during students’ individual reading and writing conferences.
While sharing her successes, Natalie expresses another common problem: “How do you empower students to make their own word discoveries while also avoiding the issue of independent reading becoming word-list-writing?” She knows that her students who are less engaged can start to rely on simply writing down scores of vocabulary words to appear productive without actually applying word-learning strategies. Especially because of this fear, Natalie shares that she also struggles with relinquishing control over students’ learning during student-driven activities, yet she is committed to developing her students’ word learning agency. This is why she is trying out a Graffiti Wall in her classroom.

Natalie’s first attempt at a Graffiti Wall is explicit and strategic, as she wants to ensure that students learn how to engage with word learning independently—first by noticing interesting, unfamiliar language, and second by having strategies to find their meanings. She models how she takes interesting, “juicy” words from the class read aloud, The Lighthouse series by Cynthia Rylant, and records them on the new Graffiti Wall. She also models how she solves the new word’s meaning before recording it on the shared space. It is clear that adding a word to the Graffiti Wall means students are accountable for knowing that word and being able to share its meaning with others. She then releases students to work in pairs, and as they do, they are observed reading magazine articles about volcanoes, earthquakes, and geothermal activity while completing collaborative work in their vocabulary journals.

Students talk throughout their reading, moving about the classroom-grabbing materials from their book boxes and pulling reference books from the shelves. Whereas Natalie selected the scientific focus of the reading, the students take responsibility for making and defending choices about which words warrant posting, engaging agentively within and beyond the content. Consequently, student conversations about language in these science articles are focused on words the students think are novel, confusing, or interesting, and are not confined only to words that are content-specific. Thus, the class builds a Graffiti Wall that, while still including technical language about geothermal phenomena, is also full of a variety of general academic words that individual students found worthy of display. With student voice not limited to scientific facts, the children are free to engage with the language of the texts agentively, even in a context with a limited content scope.

Natalie’s professional learning efforts are intentional and autonomous. She has selected the Graffiti Wall for its potential to increase student agency, but she also tempers this new approach by limiting the content focus in acknowledging her underlying fears of relinquishing control over student learning. In this space, her students were comfortable in deviating from the content-specific vocabulary to learn a variety of words from their reading. Natalie allowed these deviations, which increased the potential for these students to feel confident in being effortful, self-directed learners in future learning. Consequently, we see Natalie and her students acting agentively within the classroom, actions prompted through the agentic approach to PD that fostered collective agency across the school.

**Final thoughts**

Whereas Vaughn (2014) found that opportunities to promote student agency were often missed in her observations of elementary classrooms, the vignette and essential elements presented in the preceding sections highlight how providing space for teachers as they grapple with their own professional learning may open doors for promoting
student agency. Through an agentic approach, school leaders and teacher educators position themselves and teachers in PD contexts that foreground teacher autonomy in decision-making and reciprocity in knowledge building. This foregrounding helps dismantle the hierarchical nature of PD planning and implementation that so often excludes teachers from having “voice and choice” in teaching and learning. Moreover, our work illustrates that foregrounding teacher agency may likewise help to foster student agency.

In these reciprocal interactions to co-construct understandings of teaching, teachers are not undermined by teacher-proof curricular materials, pre-determined “best practices” that are strictly adhered to, or professional preparation that is blindly followed in an attempt to guarantee fidelity. Rather, teachers are seen as “professionals, innovators, and leaders in the complexity of classroom teaching” (Hoffman et al., 2016, p. 23), and they are trusted to use their knowledge to stand up for their professional convictions about what is best for their students (Paris & Lung, 2008). These opportunities empower teachers to establish classroom contexts that make learning possibilities visible to students and help to foster students’ willingness to agentively engage in their own learning.

Disclosure statement
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### Additional Resources


   Duke, Purcell-Gates, Hall, and Tower discuss authenticity as a vehicle to improving comprehension and writing instruction in the elementary classroom. Filled with ideas for grounding teaching in student interests, experiences, and community engagement, the article promotes teaching that support student agency in literacy.


   Examining the arts as a means of interrupting fourth grade students’ sense of alienation in school, View and Hanley make a strong case for literacy teaching that puts student voice at the center of the learning work. Ultimately, students who originally felt “talked at” and unheard found classroom space to write creatively and agentically.


   This article considers project-based learning for its capacity to facilitate meaningful literacy learning grounded in student choice, voice, and community-based motivations. In project-based learning conceptualized as student-led, the students must act agentively to develop projects that meet their personal and social goals.