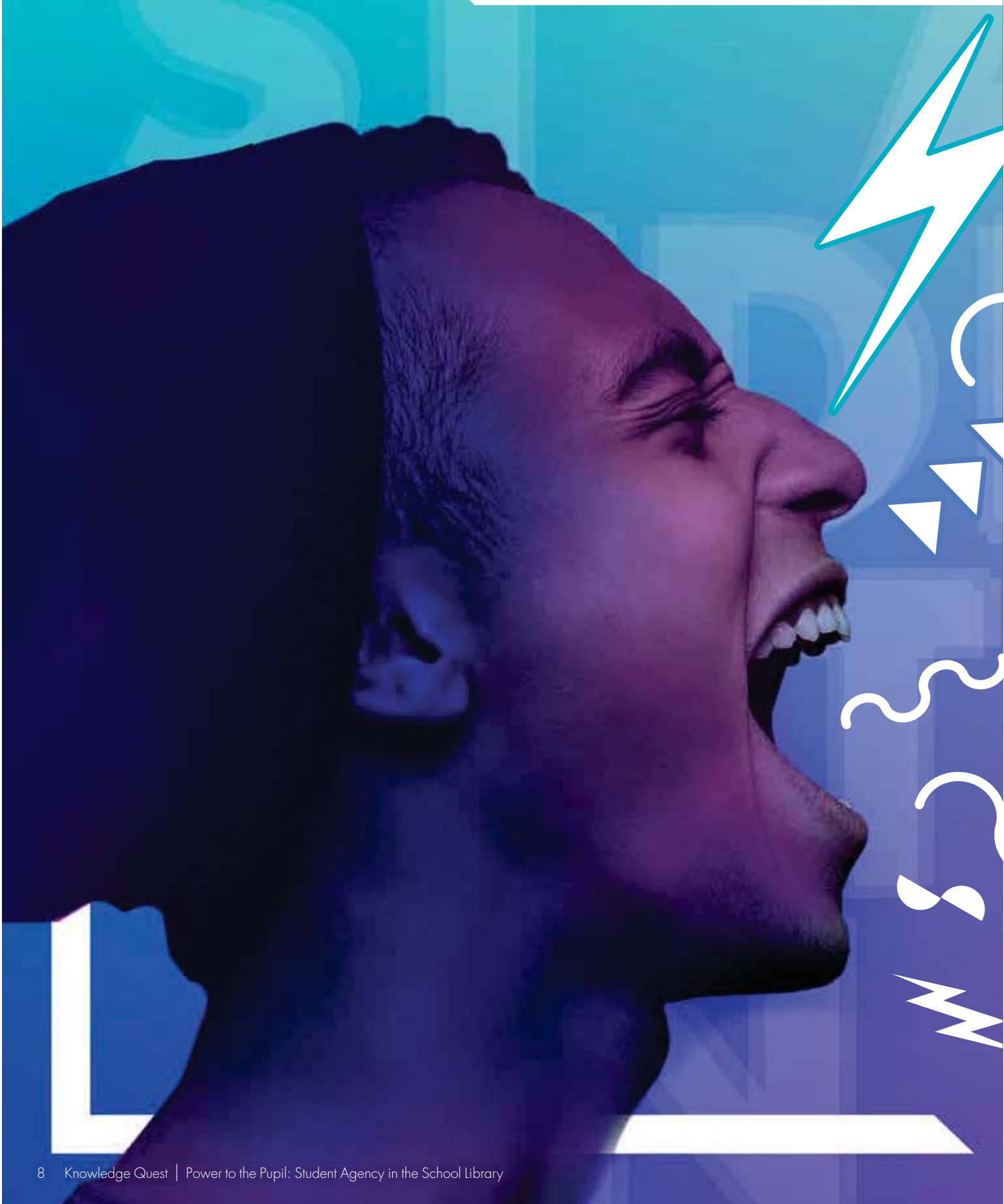
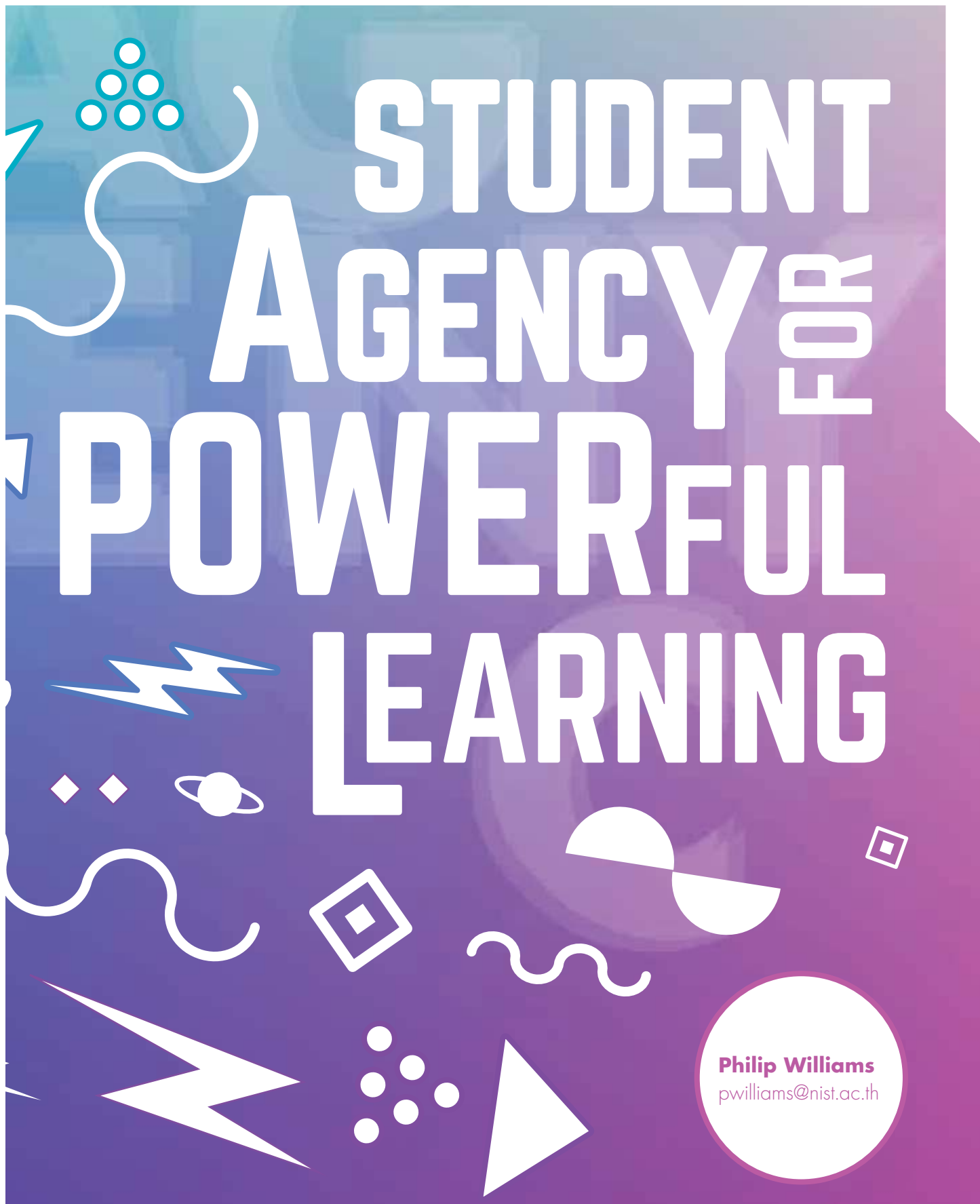


# FEATURE





# STUDENT AGENCY FOR POWERFUL LEARNING

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## Introduction

School libraries play a powerful role in enabling, informing, and sustaining student agency, and nothing engages and motivates students more deeply than enabling them to become *the* active agents in the process of learning. Research has demonstrated overwhelmingly that students who have agency in their learning are more motivated, experience greater satisfaction in their learning, and, consequently, are more likely to achieve academic success (Lin-Siegler, Dweck, and Cohen 2016, 297). Students with agency are powerful learners who are prepared to engage with the world with sustained, courageous curiosity (Claxton 2013).

## Defining Student Agency

To go any further we need to find some clarity in what we mean when we talk about student agency. Firstly, understanding *personal integrity* is a powerful place to begin. A sense of personal integrity implies a respect and appreciation for the unique attributes of the individual. It follows that embracing the value of individual uniqueness inevitably requires an appreciation for diversity in individuality within a classroom and is of central significance in every learning context. Secondly, a strong sense of *efficacy* is vital to a sense of agency. Simply put, a student with efficacy can act and will act with effect. Students have efficacy when they are empowered to take strategic steps to accomplish their goals (Johnston 2004).

A pedagogical stance that actively seeks and values student choice and voice fans the embers of student agency through building a sense of efficacy. The choices we open to students must be authentic choices through which students can see that their opinions and—most importantly—their actions can have a real

impact on themselves and the world around them. Both integrity and efficacy come together to build a sense of *agency* in which students own a strong perception that they are the key agents of their learning. Learning in this context is not simply a transference of information from the teacher to the student in a banking model of education (Freire 1972). Rather, learning based on student agency emerges from a curiosity inherent within each student.

In contrast to the student's role in the banking model of education, learning with agency is an entirely different cognitive and physical activity leading to powerful learners who choose to take on challenges with their whole being. A sense of agency allows room for, as Carol Dweck wrote in 2006, the sense of "not-yetness," the sense that expertise and mastery are attributes that are built over time through persistence in the face of failure, and through drawing on the expertise and knowledge of those around us to compile the knowledge, understandings, and skills needed to achieve the successes we strive for as individuals. When initial attempts at a task do not produce the predicted or desired results, empowered learners are drawn back to the challenge, able to refine their approach, build new skills, and act to make change.





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It is, therefore, of central importance that each student be able to develop such a perception of his or her identity, a perception built on personal integrity, efficacy, and, ultimately, agency. For such an identity to become viable, students must be convinced that they can act and see themselves as the kind of people who can face the demands of a new challenge. They build a personal identity on the belief that they have the capacity to develop the abilities they need to tackle the individual challenges they face. Their story becomes one in which they are active protagonists with the ability to affect change. With such strength and personal integrity, students with agency are able to draw on the expertise and wisdom of educators to build the knowledge, skills, and understandings young people need to create meaningful and purposeful lives for themselves.

Students with agency develop a self-perception that is based on their abilities as independent thinkers.

Our task as educators is not to tell them what to think but to help reveal their thinking by reflecting back to them what we are observing and noticing, and naming their acts of problem solving. This feedback builds a metacognitive awareness that reinforces their identities as capable thinkers who are able to construct their own understandings. This mode of learning shifts the locus of power from the teacher to the student, thus setting up students as the experts in their own learning. The traditional hierarchies of power in the classroom and school library are dismantled, and student agency can grow in an atmosphere of personal ownership and self-determination.

### Central Importance of Student Agency

Given the above introduction, few of us would disagree with the significance of student agency in learning. After all, we want engaged and motivated learners. Where

the rubber really hits the road is the extent to which student agency becomes a central focus of our teaching, planning, and managing the school library program. How wide and deep should enabling agency go? After all, students need some structure, boundaries, and guidance—if for no other reason than to ensure their safety. It is important to emphasize that enabling student agency is not a recommendation for free-range education, an unfettered release of students into the wilderness for them to explore the world unattended. Rather, it is a pedagogical stance that defines the purpose of the structures, systems, and guides we put in place. A focus on student agency presses us to ask ourselves to what extent are we tuning in to our students (Murdoch 2015). How much are we listening to student voice, being responsive to student voice, and, most importantly, enabling student voice that leads to action? Are the structures,

# IF WE SPEND LESS TIME + ENERGY ON CONTROLLING READING AND FOCUS OUR ABILITIES, EXPERTISE, AND KNOWLEDGE ON ENABLING STUDENT AGENCY IN THEIR READING,

## THE REWARDS FOR US AS EDUCATORS ARE PROFOUND.

procedures, rules, and guidelines we hold onto so dearly enhancing students' personal integrity, or are we more interested in reaffirming our authority?

As school librarians, our first question to ask before we act is, do our actions affirm individual students' integrity or do other priorities crowd our agenda? This is not to say that we should provide no limits, boundaries, or restrictions. Enabling student agency is not a call for hands-off teaching. On the contrary, it is teaching within a safe, nurturing, and guided environment where student agency is able to flourish. Guidelines, structures, and frameworks are essential; however, we need to be prepared to question to what extent these systems enable each student to take charge of his or her learning, to own the experience of discovery, and follow a course that excites the student.

For example, when managing student behavior that is unsatis-

factory, highlighting the choices students have made opens the discussion for new options and alternatives. Their past actions do not need to define their future identity because we affirm their authority to make choices. In this way, we can build students' ability to imagine a different future based on affirming their ability to choose alternatives.

Student agency is not something that can be provided in small doses and only during set lessons in the week, while at other times choice and voice are taken away. Enabling student agency requires that it pervade every aspect of each student's experience. It cannot be switched on and off at our will. At all times we need to be aware of the impact our actions as educators have on each student's belief about herself or himself as a learner. Do our actions communicate a respect for the perspective of each student? Are we as educators able to be trusted? Can students be themselves in the library setting? Assurance of positive answers to

these questions for students has a profound impact on levels of investment and motivation in their learning (Lin-Siegler, Dweck, and Cohen 2016).

Enabling student agency must, therefore, be a key driver in all that we do. A prerequisite to action. The attitudes we communicate that either deliberately or inadvertently undermine students' agency in their own learning are fundamentally unplugging students from the very engine of their learning. In *The Golden Compass* (also known as *Northern Lights*) by Philip Pullman (2002), the imagery of the "daemon" being severed from a child by scientists is both extremely disturbing and a powerful metaphor for actions that





undermine a student's sense of personal agency. Severing a student from his or her sense of efficacy, personal integrity, and agency is fundamentally cutting the student off from the very soul of learning.

### Agency and Reading

No more powerfully is this sense of agency demonstrated than in the impact recreational reading has on personal achievement and life satisfaction. Recreational reading is defined as students choosing what they want to read, when they want to read it, and where they want to read it (Krashen 2011). By definition, this implies the complete handing over of the key choices about reading to the student. It also implies a relinquishing of our control: no grading, no testing for comprehension, no book reports, and no rewards for their reading. This release of control is not easy for educators. However, when students have this level of agency they read more; they read longer; they read later into life; they learn more; their reading, writing, and mathematical skills improve; their spelling improves; their vocabulary expands; and their knowledge builds. All of these benefits just from reading for fun! As Stephen D. Krashen puts it, we can have our cake and eat it. To be clear, this is not a hands-off approach to reading. In this scenario, the teacher and school librarian have a powerful impact

on student recreational reading habits, even though we cannot (by definition) enforce, test, or reward these behaviors to make them happen.

The excitement and anticipation about reading that we are looking for is built by fostering conversations around a broad range of rich and compelling literature. Providing and facilitating access to quality literature also has a powerful impact on levels of recreational reading. Furthermore, building students' identities as readers and writers fills them with the confidence to approach new and demanding genres or texts. When they begin to experience the power of this sense of agency for themselves, a world of adventure, exploration, and experience opens up to them. The lights switch on, and our most-challenging task is to keep up with their progress, to keep feeding the fire that has been lit, to keep fanning the flames of inquiry. We are left to wonder at the phenomenal ability of the human mind to learn, develop, explore, and achieve. If we spend less time and energy on controlling reading and focus our abilities, expertise, and knowledge on enabling student agency in their reading, the rewards for us as educators are profound as we observe students exhibiting the powerful learning that they are fully capable of.

### Some Practical Examples from My Own Experience


#### *Creating Citations for Their Own Work*

Teaching citation and attribution to students is often a dry and didactic experience for students based on the imperative to be honest and principled. By reframing citation as a disposition that builds student agency we can expand and reframe the purpose of attribution. How? By encouraging students to cite their own work. For example, if a student takes a photo for an exhibition or interviews a peer for research, creating a citation that accurately communicates the student's role builds her or his identity as a creator and builds a sense of accomplishment in the generative act.

#### *Talking about Literature and Choices*

A common situation we face as school librarians occurs when a student selects from the shelves a book that we know is too challenging. Our first instinct is often to override the choice and explain why another title should be selected. An alternative approach that affirms the student's right to choice would involve engaging in an open dialogue that does not judge the choice but encourages conversation about literature and the choices we make. Most times we can learn from the student and discover how many different ways children approach text. When that student returns to the library, the environment is open and conducive to





further discussion about reading, providing wide opportunities to help the student build ever-deepening sophistication in his or her identity as a reader. As we begin to understand our students more, we can find more-creative ways to introduce them to more-accessible texts and provide more opportunities to enable moments of discovery. Therefore, through affirming students' choices and keeping communication open, we build student agency in their reading and retain future opportunities for learning.

### *Creating Their Own Books*

Another powerful affirmation of student agency is to catalog, barcode, and display books students have created. I never edit their text; I only inquire into what they have created and the process they went through to create their books. We catalog their books together, which creates opportunities to discuss subject matter, genre, target audience, summaries, why they think other children will want to read their book, and where they think their book should live in the library. Frequently, their peers witness this process and become a part of this rich discussion about literature, further affirming the students' identities as creators and key agents in the creative process. Spelling, neatness, grammar, illustrations, and binding are not modified or corrected. However,

we do discuss these elements and, invariably, the student generates ideas about how these elements could be improved in the future. Throughout this process in which I play the part of an appreciative, inquiring observer, I am able to affirm the student's self-perception as a capable creator and open the door for further open dialogue in the future.

### *Collaborating with Their Librarian*

The physical design of school library spaces can also have a profound impact on student agency. For example, in some situations, removing the tall, overwhelming circulation desk in favor of a round table where students and the librarians are better able to sit and engage in discussion works toward breaking down authoritarian barriers between the library and students. Installing a self-checkout counter can serve to further hand the processes of accessing literature over to the students and minimize the heavy administrative presence of the library staff. The result of these changes can be a library that dismantles symbols of authority and invites a collaborative partnership with librarians. The impression when first entering the library becomes an invitation to explore,

discover, and collaborate rather than comply, submit, and get out as soon as possible.

### *Developing a Sense of Ownership and Library Agency*

Coplanning and coteaching with classroom teachers opens more opportunities for them to lead their classes into the library's virtual and physical spaces, thus enabling more-authentic connections with student learning. Release time for teachers is vital. However, there are better ways of finding this time than using the library as a timetable-management strategy. Teachers' dropping off classes for library lessons disconnects the library from the learning happening during the rest of the day. Our creating a context where teachers and students develop a sense of ownership and library agency leads to a sense of expertise that drives opportunities for discovery and collaborative learning. Librarians may perceive the agency of students and the classroom teacher as a diminishing of our role, but the contrary is true. When our role has achieved the highest level, our patrons have been empowered to demonstrate agency in their use of the library.



## Impact of Agency on Learning

Peter H. Johnston has written very powerfully about student agency in his book *Choice Words: How Our Language Affects Children's Learning*. He wrote, "Children should leave school with a sense that if they act, and act strategically, they can accomplish their goals" (2004, 29)—a sense that they are in control and feel in control. "The spark of agency is simply the perception that the environment is responsive to our actions." Agency is "a fundamental human desire" (Johnston 2004, 29), and, I would argue, a fundamental human right. Our conversations with students and how we interact with them can help students build bridges between their actions and results, reinforcing a sense that they are the kind of people who accomplish things.

Students with a strong sense of personal integrity, efficacy, and agency do the following:

- Work harder.
- They have greater focus.
- They have more interest.

They are less likely to give up.  
They are better at planning.  
They are more likely to choose challenging tasks.  
They set higher goals.  
They have improved concentration when difficulties are faced.  
And the process is iterative, that is, it creates a positive cycle of success. (Johnston 2004, 40–41)

In the words of Eric Toshalis and Michael J. Nakkula:

When we dig beneath the surface of high-stakes standardization strategies to the real adolescents below, we find young people striving and struggling to make a life for themselves, an authentic life capable of surmounting challenges and accessing supports in their everyday world. A life that makes sense to them in their world—this is what motivation, engagement, and student voice address. (2016, 2)

What more could we want for our students?



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